

# A Mother's Love

**By: lord of the land of fire**

Uzumaki Kushina survived her son's birth and the Kyuubi's attack. Now she must do everything in her power to protect him and help him reach his dream, to be Hokage. Naru X Hina X Yugito

Status: complete

Published: 2007-12-01

Updated: 2008-06-07

Words: 376514

Chapters: 101

Rated: Fiction M - Language: English - Genre: Drama/Romance -  
Characters: Naruto U., Hinata H. - Reviews: 9,503 - Favs: 8,493 - Follows:  
4,273

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/3922556/1/A-Mother-s-Love>

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## The terrible night

Through her agony she heard a baby's cry. She opened her eyes and focused. "Give him to me." She said weakly.

The attending physician checked her pulse, it was dropping dangerously. "Kushina, you've lost a lot of blood. You need immediate surgery or you're going to die!" The sight of all that blood bothered her but she couldn't let herself freeze up when her friend's life was at stake.

She held out her arms. "Tsunade give me my son."

Frowning Tsunade nevertheless put the wrapped child into his mother's arms. "All right, but only for a moment. Then we have to begin the surgery."

She carefully took her son and smiled down at him. He had his father's eyes. He was crying. "Shhh, hush now my little one. Hush my little Naruto. Your mother is here and everything is all right." And as she held him he quieted down. It stunned her just how much she loved him. "Everything is all right my little one." She whispered to him.

"Kushina I have to take him." The man she loved, her husband, the father of her child spoke.

She looked up into his face and saw his tears. "No," she begged. "I take it back! You can't use him for this! Please Minato I beg you! Not for this! Isn't it enough that you're going to die? Must you do this to your own son?" Her voice was breaking. She knew there was no choice but she didn't care.

"Whose child shall I choose?" Minato asked sadly. "How can I ask some other parent to make a sacrifice that I am not willing to make?"

"I don't care!" She wailed and held him closer. "It's too much to ask it's not fair!"

"No Kushina it's not." He agreed sadly. "But it must be done."

"I am sorry Kushina but you have to go into surgery right now." Tsunade put a needle in her arm and injected her.

"No... don't... don't..." Kushina closed her eyes.

Namikaze Minato, the Yondaime Hokage of Konohagakure took his new born son into his arms. He wept unashamedly. "Forgive me my darling wife; forgive me my beloved son for what I must do now." He looked at Tsunade. "Will she be all right?"

"I hope so but I can't guarantee it."

He nodded. He prayed that both she and Naruto would be all right. But he knew that whatever happened he would not be there to see. "Please tell her that I love her and am truly sorry, but this is the only way."

"I will tell her." Tsunade promised. *But she knows all ready.*

He looked at his crying son. "They'll see you as a hero my son. They will honor you for the sacrifice you make for their sakes."

Tsunade watched him leave the operating room with his son. *I am never going to see that brave man again.* She couldn't even spend any more time regretting Minato's fate. She began the emergency surgery to try and save his wife. *I shouldn't even be here. I should be in a casino hundreds of miles away But when a friend asks you to deliver her child how do you say no?* She truly hated being in Konoha. Everything here just reminded her of all that she had lost. And now here she was trapped in the middle of a tragedy of epic proportions. *If I survive this I swear I am never coming back to this village ever again.*

---

She slowly opened her eyes. There was sunlight coming through a window. She was lying in a small bed.

"Good you're awake." A familiar voice spoke.

She had to focus for a moment. "Tsunade?"

Tsunade smiled and nodded. She stood up from the chair she'd been sitting in and stretched. "You're very lucky that I came. It was close, so how do you feel?"

"Tired, more tired than I can ever remember being."

"I believe that. You're going to need to stay in bed for at least a week to fully recover."

Then she suddenly remembered. She sat bolt upright and was rewarded with a sharp stabbing pain in her belly. "Minato!"

"Easy, easy!" Tsunade eased her back into the bed. "No sudden movements! Your body is in a weakened state. You need to take it easy."

She looked up at her friend. "Tsunade, is Minato?"

Tsunade shook her head. "I'm very sorry Kushina but he's gone. But he didn't die in vain. He stopped the Kyuubi and saved this entire village."

She shut her eyes and grieved for him. *Oh Minato why?* She opened her eyes and began to look about the room. "Naruto!" She looked at Tsunade in panic. "Where is Naruto? Where is my son?"

"He's alive Kushina and unhurt." Tsunade assured her but then looked worried. "Right now he is with the old man. There is an emergency meeting of the Council. They are deciding his fate."

"What do you mean his fate?!" His mother demanded. "I want my son right now!"



"Kushina I can't bring him to you I'm sorry."

"Then bring me to him!" She tossed off her blanket and began getting out of bed.

"Stop!" Tsunade grabbed her. "Kushina if you push too hard you'll reopen your wounds and die!"

"Fine," she grunted in pain. "Get me a wheelchair then, but I'm going to my son."

Seeing the look in her eyes she knew there was no arguing with her. She turned to her assistant Shizune. "Please bring me a wheelchair."

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"The demon must be killed now!" Uchiha Fugaku roared to the general approval of the Council. "We cannot afford to waste the heroic sacrifice of the Yondaime! We must complete what he began!"

"That would be quite short sighted." Danzou stood and spoke firmly. "This child could become Konoha's ultimate weapon. Alone he could guarantee this village's supremacy."

"And I say letting it live even a moment longer is too dangerous!" Fugaku demanded.

"There is no *it* " The Sandaime said quietly and with dignity. "There is a him." He pointed to the crib beside his seat. Amazingly the child was sleeping peacefully through all the shouting. "Do you understand what it is that you are suggesting Fugaku? You wish not only to murder a helpless infant but the Yondaime's only son."

"I am truly sorry that it is necessary to sacrifice the Yondaime's son to guarantee the survival of this village. But how many innocents have died already?" Fugaku asked. "I say the demon must be killed!"

" **TOUCH HIM AND I SWEAR I WILL KILL YOU!!**" A woman's voice cried out from the doorway. They all stopped to look. There was

Uzumaki Kushina in a hospital gown sitting in a wheelchair being pushed by none other than the Sannin Tsunade.

"Sarutobi, give me my son. I am taking him home with me right now." Kushina demanded.

"How dare you interrupt us!" Uchiha Fugaku spoke up. "This is a meeting of the Council. You have no place here."

"My place is wherever my son is!" Kushina shot back. "And as for a meeting of the Council I believe Namikaze has a hereditary seat does it not? With the death of my husband I am now head of the Namikaze clan."

"Husband?!" Koharu shouted.

"When were you married?" Danzou demanded.

"A year and a half ago in Whirlpool country. Minato-kun wanted to keep it secret to protect me. He did however have the marriage documents filed with the office of citizenry so that in case we had children their citizenship would not be in dispute. Sarutobi can personally vouch for this as Minato gave him the papers."

Before an argument could erupt Sarutobi spoke up. "It is true and I can provide you all with copies of the documents."

An unhappy murmur ran through the Council. Everyone had known that Kushina was the woman in the Yondaime's life. No one questioned Naruto's paternity. But it made a world of difference to them whether he was a fatherless bastard or the legitimate heir to one of the richest and most honored clans in Konoha.

"This makes no difference!" Fugaku shouted. "Whether the child is legitimate or not he must die to preserve Konoha."

"Lay one finger on him and I **will** kill you!" Kushina threatened.

"And if she doesn't then I will!" Tsunade growled. "I am Naruto's godmother and I'll slaughter anyone who threatens my godson."

Hyuga Hiashi suddenly stood up. "The Hyuga clan will also protect this child." He declared loudly which brought all conversation to a halt. "Hyuga and Namikaze have shared close ties for generations and the Yondaime was a dear friend to both me and my wife. Out of respect for his memory we will not allow any harm to befall his son."

This declaration by the Hyuga clan was decisive. Even Uchiha Fugaku had no stomach for openly opposing the Sandaime, a Sannin, Namikaze, and Hyuga. Kushina looked over to Hiashi and bowed her head to him in deepest gratitude. Hiashi nodded in acknowledgement.

"Sarutobi give me my son." Kushina said. Nodding Sarutobi reached into the crib and did just that. His mother took him and held him close. "Shhh, there, there, my little one it's all right now. I won't let anyone hurt you." The sight of a mother holding her child made many of the Council members who had been calling for blood just moments ago reconsider. They were all ninja, they were all killers, but even for ninja there should be limits. Uchiha Fugaku did not change his mind though he remained silent.

"I am going to pass a special decree." Sarutobi announced. "In order to give this child some chance at a normal life. I order that no one who knows the truth of the Kyuubi be allowed to speak of it to anyone who does not know. And this will include speaking of it to your own children. The only people who shall be permitted to do so shall be the sitting Hokage and Naruto himself when he gets older."

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"You should really still be in the hospital." Tsunade repeated.

"No," Kushina repeated. "If the *Council members* were that savage I certainly don't trust the regular villagers. I can better protect Naruto here than in a hospital. All the servants have worked here for years and loved Minato. I trust none of them would ever harm his son."

Tsunade sighed once again defeated. Kushina gave her friend a sly little smile. "So you're his godmother huh? Funny I don't recall me or Minato ever offering you the position."

Tsunade looked a bit embarrassed. "It's called a bluff. Sometimes you can convince an opponent you have more in your hand than you really do."

Kushina shrugged. "It's fine Tsunade. Since you've volunteered the job is yours. If anything happens to me I expect you to take care of my son."

Tsunade looked at her in panic. "Nothing had better happen to you! I am not cut out to be a mother!"

Kushina enjoyed her first honest laugh since the whole ordeal had begun. "You'd better heal me well then."

"Look Kushina." Tsunade said seriously. "I'll stay until you're well but once I leave I'm not coming back."

"Awww, so you never want to see me or your godson ever again?" She held up her son so his smiling face was looking directly at the Sannin. "Naruto-kun would miss you, wouldn't you my little Naruto-kun?"

Tsunade looked at the child's adorable little face. "Stop it! You are shamelessly using your baby's cuteness against me!"

Kushina gave her one of her huge smiles. "Whatever works."

Tsunade grinned. "All right I'll tell you what. Since I have two reasons to come back here I'll promise to return for at least a few days each year. How's that?"

Kushina turned her son around so that he was facing her. "Well what do *you* think?" Naruto laughed at the funny face she made. "Naruto and I accept your terms."

# Birthday

**Author's Note:** Thanks to everyone for the truly extraordinary reception you have given this story. The day after I posted this I checked my email and I had over **seventy** emails for reviews, favorites and alerts. This is the ninth story I have posted and I have **never** gotten a response like that for any of them. Thank you and I hope you will continue to enjoy it.

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Oct. 9 Five years later

As she tried to chase down her son she wondered if all five years olds could possibly have this much energy. He was always a rather excitable boy and now he was so excited about his party he was practically bouncing off the walls. Even with everything he had to endure, he was a very happy and in most ways very normal child. That amazed her sometimes. Naruto always seemed to be happy. She would think of the things he had missing in his life such as his father, a group of friends his own age or the freedom to go about unwatched. She would feel guilty thinking he was deprived. Yet then he would smile and laugh and she would be reminded of what he did have. He had a home where he was protected and watched over, he had one kind hearted girl who was his friend, and he had a mother who loved him with all of her heart. He had love and was never ever alone. That seemed enough to make him a very happy little boy.

They lived in a mansion on a vast estate neighboring the Hyuga's. They were wealthy and had loyal servants who cared for Naruto. They were rich in wealth, power, and honor. That did not mean life was easy or trouble free. Naruto was rarely ever allowed to leave the Namikaze estates. When he did leave he wore custom made body armor, had an ANBU squad to escort him, and had his mom there armed to the teeth. The precautions were not excessive. There had been no fewer than forty seven attempts on his life. A dozen of those had been made by shinobi with the rest being made by regular

citizens. That broke her heart. Minato-kun had tried to protect her from the enemies he had made in foreign villages. But it was his own people who wanted to kill his son. The people he had *died to protect*. To most of them her late husband was little short of a god. The people of Konoha worshipped his memory. Yet some of them saw no contradiction when they tried to kill his son.

She didn't try to argue with or convince them. She just killed them. All around the perimeter of the Namikaze estate were large red signs with blocky black letters. These signs informed one and all that trespassers would be killed on sight and without warning. And they were. She had been one of the most powerful Jonin of Whirlpool country when she'd met and fallen in love with Minato. Since her pregnancy she'd not gone on a single mission. But she'd kept her skills sharp and put them to regular use. So far she had killed fourteen shinobi, including one Chunin and one Jonin, and one hundred and thirty seven citizens. She carried a razor sharp four foot long katana and was a blade master. She had no problem dulling it on any one who threatened her child. Minato had been the world's leading seal master, surpassing even his sensei Jiraiya. Every inch of the perimeter and every entry way on the mansion had been warded. She was no seal master but Mianto had shown her enough to maintain and use the seals he'd put there. No one could enter the Namikaze estates or mansion without her knowing it. And when anyone did so without her permission she killed them. She never asked them for their reasons or offered to let them surrender. Last year in the early morning of October tenth half a dozen men managed to scramble over the ten foot high iron fence and barbed wire. They were clearly drunk and armed with nothing more deadly than bats and broken bottles. She could easily have knocked them out and tied them up. She didn't. She separated their heads from their drunken bodies and piled them up outside her front gate where people could see them.

The Hokage had called her into his office after that and asked her why she had done that to men who were no real threat to her. Kushina replied that everyone in Konoha knew where the Namikaze

estates were and who lived there. Those men had gone there deliberately, ignored the warning on the big red signs, and proceeded to climb over a ten foot iron fence topped with barbed wire. If they were willing to do all that for the sake of trying to harm her son then they were serious enough to deserve killing. Legally there was really nothing Sarutobi could do. When Konoha had been founded the clans had been granted special privileges. One being that the clans were given the right to deal with trespassers in any fashion they chose, up to and including killing them on sight. Kushina deliberately fostered a frightening reputation; she thought that was the best answer for so much mindless fear and hate. Since that incident there had been only four attempts in the past year.

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"Hey mom, mom!" Naruto was jumping around her.

"Yes dear?"

"After the party can we go train some?"

His mother smiled at him and nodded. "If that's what you want to do then of course dear."

"Yeah!" He shouted and ran off again.

He was only 5 but she had been giving him training. She had brought him up on stories of his father. That part of his legacy he knew well. The other part would wait a few more years. He had embraced his heritage as the son and heir of the great man and was determined to be even greater. He wanted to be Hokage and to protect the village as his father had done. That was her son's dream and she would do everything in her power to make it happen. So far she had given him taijutsu training and started on basic weapons; kunai and shuriken. He was already itching to get a katana in his hands. But he would have to master kunai and shuriken first. He loved training with her. No exercise was too hard or too repetitive so long as he was doing it with her. She would start giving him ninjutsu training before he entered the academy. She had already decided

that he would attend the academy. Not so much for the instruction as for the chance to interact with his peers. If he was going to be Hokage one day then he would need to know how to deal with people in different situations.

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Hiashi, his wife Hannah, and their little daughter Hinata arrived. "Welcome and thank you so much for coming." Kushina greeted them. Since that day in the Council meeting Hiashi and the Hyuga clan were about the only people in Konoha willing to treat Naruto like a normal child. On those rare occasions she had to be away he stayed at the Hyuga mansion under their protection.

"It is our pleasure." Hiashi said.

"Hinata has been looking forward to this all week." Hannah said with a smile.

Naruto stepped forward and offered them a proper greeting. He then turned to Hinata, his favorite playmate and only friend of his own age, and gave her a huge smile. "Hey Hinata-chan want to play?"

The little girl immediately blushed and pressed her index fingers together. "Su... sure Naruto-kun." He grabbed her hand and led the way.

As the two of them went off to play the parents all shared a smile.

"Don't they make a cute couple?" Kushina asked.

"They do indeed." Hiashi agreed.

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"Kakashi niisan!" Naruto shouted excitedly.

The ANBU captain and former student of his father's smiled at him from beneath his mask. "Yo, happy birthday Naruto."



"Can you summon your dogs so I can play with them?" He asked eagerly.

"Sure."

Kakashi had taken it upon himself to watch out for his beloved sensei's son. When Naruto left the estates Kakashi was always the one in charge of the ANBU escort. He also made it a point to visit him regularly to share stories about his father. Naruto in turn had come to look up to him as an older brother.

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The door opened to reveal a ninja with huge spiky white hair and red lines running down from his eyes. "Look my little one. Do you know who this is?"

"Pervy grand dad!" He sang out.

A vein immediately began to throb on Jiraiya's forehead. "Kid I've told you before not to call me that!"

"Naruto-kun where did you come up with that name?" Kushina asked sounding surprised.

Her son looked up at her in confusion. "You told me to call him that mommy."

"Oh that's right! Now I remember!" She sent Jiraiya a big smile.

"He's going to end up with your sense of humor." Jiraiya said flatly.

"Yes, I suppose he will."

"Kami help us all. Is there sake?"

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"Godmother, auntie Shizune!" Naruto jumped into Tsunade's arms. He was immediately caught up and smothered in kisses from the two women.

Tsunade put him and smiled. "Well Naruto is it just my imagination or do you just keep getting cuter every time I see you?"

He put his hands behind his head and gave her a huge smile. "No, I'm getting cuter."

Both women burst out laughing. "Oh, I agree you definitely are!" Shizunue said.

Kushina watched with an impish grin. "Still don't think you're cut out for motherhood?"

Tsunade sent her friend a grin. "A few days a year are my limit any more than that and I'd go crazy."

"Tsunade, good to see you again!" A slightly tipsy Jiraiya came out.

She sent Kushina a betrayed look. "I didn't know he was going to be here. Why didn't you tell me he'd be here?"

Kushina smiled. "I wanted you to come."

Frowning Tsunade grabbed the bottle of sake Jiraiya was holding. "Give me that!" She brought it to her lips and downed it in one swig.

"Is something wrong godmother?"

She smiled down at Naruto with a bit more color in her cheeks. "Oh no honey, I'm just happy."

Jiraiya laughed. "Wait a couple hours and she'll be even happier."

Kushina just managed to cover up her son's eyes so he didn't see godmother start beating on granddad.

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"Hello Naruto, happy birthday."

"Hey old man!" Naruto said.

"Naruto-kun, please show our guest the proper respect and call him Hokage-sama." Kushina said gently.

"What?!" An insulted Jiraiya approached them. His left eye was closed and the large black eye made an interesting contrast to the rest of his face. "I am Jiraiya one of the three ninjas of legend, the all knowing Toad Sage, as well as a respected and famous author. How come you have Naruto treat Sarutobi with respect but not me?!"

Kushina sent him a frosty smile. "Sarutobi never tried to peep on me in the bath house."

"It was a compliment!"

"Oh yeah? Well if you ever try and *compliment* me like that again I'll take something a lot more precious to you than your life." Her eyes dropped to a spot below his belt.

He suddenly stiffened and walked away. "I'm getting more sake before Tsunade drinks it all."

The Hokage let out a depressed sigh. "My students."

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As she talked to Hannah she felt a familiar sensation on her arm. *Damn it why now?* Keeping a serene look on her face she excused herself. She calmly walked to the outer hallway. Seeing she was alone she quickly rolled up one of her sleeves to expose her left forearm. On it was an intricate tattoo of a tree with branches and one hundred and thirty two leaves. Each leaf contained a number. The tattoo was of course a seal; one Jiraiya had been kind enough to give her that connected her to all the wards on the estates. Looking at the tattoo the tree trunk, branches, and leaves all seemed to be made of black ink. Except for the leaf that bore the number 77, that one was red. She rolled the sleeve back down and casually headed towards the front door. Her habit of always being armed and in her gear meant she didn't have to waste time getting ready. With luck she could be back before anyone even knew she had gone.

"Mom!" Naruto ran up to her just as she was heading for the door. She let out a small sigh. He seemed to have a sixth sense when it came to her leaving or returning. "Mom where are you going?" He latched onto her leg.

Smiling she reached down and stroked one of his whiskered cheeks. "Mommy just needs to take care of something then I'll be right back."

He tightened his grip on her leg. "Don't go mom! I want you to stay."

She looked into his face and saw that he was scared. He was a very strong and brave boy. Most of the time he handled things with a maturity far beyond his years. But then there were times when he behaved like a five year old. More specifically he acted like a five year old whose mother was his entire world. He usually hid it well, but she knew he hated it whenever she was away. Smiling she bent down and gave him a comforting hug. "It's all right my dear one." She looked over at the grandfather clock in the hall. "Naruto-kun what time does the clock say?"

He looked over at the large ornate clock. "It says 7:33."

She gave him a confident look. "Mommy will be back in five minutes, before the clock says 7:38."

This seemed to calm his fears. "Promise mommy?"

"I promise!" She gave him a kiss on his cheek. "I never go back on my word, for that is my nindo, my ninja way. Now go and play with Hinata." Naruto nodded and went into the family room where Hinata was rubbing Pakkun's belly. She checked her watch and hurried to the door.

Kakashi had watched the scene play out and a suspicion what was going on. "Anything I can help you with Kushina?"

She sent the young ANBU captain a light hearted smile. "Oh no, just woman's work."

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She didn't have trouble finding him. He was hiding in some bushes on the southern end of the estates where the woods were. They *always* through the south end where the trees and shrubs were. Never mind that there were *three hundred yards* of flat ground and mowed grass to the mansion.

"You're early." Her voice called to him.

"Ack!" The single man jumped to his feet, pulled out his weapon, and looked up. There about twenty feet above him stood a beautiful woman with long red hair. As she was currently defying gravity standing parallel to the ground, her feet planted on the tree trunk. Her hair draped off to the side. She was dressed in a black body suit with very dark red stripes running down the arms and legs. Around her forehead she wore a hitai-ite, but not one with the leaf symbol. Hers had eight lines curving to meet in the center, like a pinwheel or whirlpool. Along her belt she had several pouches and some bulky lines along her body suggested she wore body armor underneath. He could also see the handle of a weapon sticking out from behind her left shoulder.

"Red Death." He gasped.

She smiled and nodded. "Yeah, that's what idiots like you call me." She shrugged. "It's fine since that's exactly what I am to anyone who threatens my son." She looked at her watch. "I have to be back in three and a half minutes, that's how long you have left to live." She looked down at him considering. "You know I decided to celebrate his birthday a day early because every October tenth I have to deal with idiots like you. The first year I had to deal with three separate groups, one of them led by a Chunin. So after last year I finally decided to just celebrate it a day early. I mean so long as he gets to eat cake, open presents, and play with people he's happy. Maybe next year we'll just celebrate in July or August." She looked at her watch again. "Three minutes to go now."

"Why?" The man choked out.

"Why what? Why am I talking to you? Why do I love double mint fudge?"

"Why do you protect that monster?" He never saw them coming. All he saw were her arms move in a blur. The next thing he knew he was on the ground screaming. A dozen kunai were jutting out of him. As he continued to cry out she spoke to him in a clear calm voice.

"You're not very bright are you? Here's a tip; never tell a mother her child is a monster. Here's another tip; if you're just a villager with a rusty sword don't take on a ninja. *Especially* not if she used to be an ANBU captain in her homeland. And just one more tip; when you see big red signs posted everywhere you should pay attention to them." She glanced at her watch. "Two minutes."

Despite his pain and being at her mercy he looked up at her in pure hate. "He killed my father! He crushed him!"

"Who did?" She asked not caring to make anything easy for him.

"You know who!"

"If you mean my son I don't see how he could as he's not very heavy."

"You mock me." He growled.

"No, I'd have to like you at least a little bit to mock you. I find you and your kind utterly despicable. I am sorry for the loss of your father to the *Kyuubi*. Though I doubt you believe me the fact is I mean that. I lost my husband, and I loved him. I hate the *Kyuubi* as much as anyone in this village. But hating the prisoner in no way justifies attacking his jailer."

"He has the *Kyuubi* inside him."

"That's right." She said. "My husband gave his life to imprison the *Kyuubi* and my son will spend every day of his life keeping the

Kyuubi imprisoned. And just so you know this is the last minute of your life."

"He has to die to protect the village." As he watched the one they called Red Death leapt down beside him. She reached over her shoulder and pulled out a long thin curved blade.

"No," she said firmly. "He has to live to protect this village. He is my husband's legacy. He has all of Minato's strengths inside him. I can see in him that same love and courage that made my husband what he was. And when I look close I can see the greatest of all future Hokages. He will protect this village someday as his father did. And now..." she lifted her katana high over her head. "Go to whatever hell is reserved for those who would kill children." The sword fell and did its work in a single cut.

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She ran in and looked at the clock. *Hah! Fifteen seconds to spare!* She quickly approached her son confident he would not notice anything. One of the advantages of wearing black and dark red was that blood stains were practically invisible. "See my dear one? Mommy made it back just like she promised."

Naruto looked up at her excitedly. "Mom can we open presents now?"

Kushina smiled and nodded. "Of course dear, anything for you."

# The Academy

He was standing in front of a mirror looking at himself. The body armor felt a little snug like always, but he liked the way it looked.

"You look so handsome my little Naruto-kun" His mother said happily.

He looked at her and hesitated a bit. "Mom," he said. "Is it all right to be scared?"

With a gentle smile she went down on her knees and hugged him tight. "My little one, of course it is! I've felt fear many times."

"You?" he looked at her in shock.

She laughed and pulled him into another hug. "Of course! Being shinobi doesn't mean we stop being human. Bravery is not having a lack of fear. It's the ability to do what you need to even in the face of your fear. Always do what you know to be right, even if you are afraid. If you do that I will always be proud of you."

He immediately hugged her back fiercely. "I want you to be proud of me mom!"

"My little one, I have never been anything else." When he finally let go of her she got up to get his coat and help him put it on. Once it was on he looked at himself in the mirror again.

"Mom if I wear this everyone is going to notice me." He looked at her questioningly. "You always say a good ninja should be able to blend in anywhere. Won't this make me stand out?"

She nodded, pleased that he had taken that lesson to heart. Most boys his age were eager to stand out. Naruto wanted to earn peoples respect through his actions. He didn't care about simply being noticed for how he looked. "In this village Naruto-kun there is



no avoiding that. When you begin your shinobi career and travel to other places you can try and become invisible. But in Konoha everyone who looks at you will know who you are." Suddenly her face changed and she gave him one of her rare stern looks. Inside he panicked and wondered if he had done something wrong. "Listen very carefully to what I am about to say Naruto." Paling a bit he nodded and gave his mom his complete attention. "People are going to look at you Naruto, and some of them will hate you. Don't ever wonder if it's your fault they look at you with hate. Those people are blind and will never see the truth no matter how many times you show it to them. But for everyone else, try and show them what is in here," She gently touched his chest. "And here." She touched his forehead. Show all of them that you are Namikaze Naruto. You *are* your father's son and you are *my* son. In you is all the best of the Namikaze and Uzumaki clans. In you my son is a great man and great leader. Some day you will be clan head and, I have no doubt, you will be the greatest of all Hokages." She shut her eyes and tried not to sob. *Oh Minato, if only you could see him how proud you'd be!*

"Mom why are you crying?" Naruto felt himself about to start crying as well and didn't know why.

Opening her eyes she quickly wiped her cheeks and gave him a reassuring smile. "I am crying because the world is unfair. Naruto I want you to promise me something."

"Anything mom!"

"Promise me that whatever happens in your life. No matter how you may be hated, no matter what terrible secrets you may learn, and no matter how hard things may become; promise me that you will never forget who you are!"

He put his arms around her and hugged her with all of his might.

"Mom I swear to you on my life that I will never forget who I am or who I come from. That's my promise of a lifetime!"

"And you never go back on your word because that is your nindo."  
She smiled at her son.

He nodded. "Just like yours."

She gave her son a kiss on the cheek and brightened a bit. "Well let's go Naruto-kun or your silly mother will make you late for your first day at the academy."

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"Are you all right Hinata-san?" Kurenai asked feeling real sympathy for the poor girl. She seemed very depressed.

"I am fine." She said dully. "Please just call me Hinata." Just a short while ago her father had told her that he was disappointed in her and did not think she was a worthy successor. Since her mother's death two years ago her father had grown increasingly distant and critical. His harsh words not only hurt her they played on her own self doubt. *I'm weak, maybe father is right.*

"Hey Hinata-chan." Her thoughts lifted when she heard his voice. He and his mother were approaching. She immediately noticed how he was dressed.

"Oh, he... hello Naruto-kun, y... you lo... look very handsome this morning." She felt herself begin to blush as she smiled shyly. Her index fingers were pressing against each other.

Naruto gave her one of his big smiles and scratched the back of his head. "Thanks Hinata-chan, you look as cute as you always do." Hearing that she immediately went three shades darker.

Kurenai offered a formal bow to the woman who was the head of the Namikaze clan. "I am Yuhi Kurenai and am most honored to meet you Kushina-san. I thank you for allowing Hinata and I to accompany you and your son."

Kushina smiled and returned the bow. "Please call me Kushina. And you are very welcomed. Hinata is a dear child and I welcome one more set of eyes to watch out for trouble."

Hinata laughed and the two of them looked at her and Naruto. Kurenai grinned and sent Kushina a questioning look. Kushina grinned and nodded. Two ANBU operatives landed about ten feet from them. One of them approached and bowed to Kushina. "Kushina-san I am captain Tenzo and I am in charge of the two man ANBU squad that will escort your son to the academy and back again.

Kushina acknowledged him with a slight bow of her own. "Thank you captain, with Kakashi out of the village I trust that you will make sure of my son's safety. Kakashi thinks highly of you and I trust his opinion. If he trusts you then I will as well."

"Thank you Kushina-san." He and his partner disappeared.

Kushina turned to the two children. "Shall we go?"

"Yeah! Come on Hintata!" As was his habit he grabbed her hand and led the way. As was her habit she blushed and followed him. Hinata kept a small grin as they walked in public. Though she knew they were only friends she let herself pretend for a bit that he was her boyfriend and they were strolling hand in hand.

As they went down the streets they noticed. As Kushina had warned her son, everyone in Konoha knew instantly who he was. And if by some bizarre miracle they hadn't what he was wearing would have driven it home. The reception was about what Kushina had expected. Perhaps one in ten people openly scowled or looked angrily at them. But no one dared to yell or curse at them, never mind approach them. Kushina's reputation was such that even on crowded streets they tended to be given at least ten feet of space. About one in ten actually bowed or cheered as they past. These were people to whom Naruto was the Yondaime's son not the Kyuubi. To them at least Naruto really was a hero, or at least the son

of a hero which would do. To Kushina this minority represented how everyone in Konoha should have behaved towards her son. Seeing them gave Kushina a small hope that things would get better. Actually they had gotten better. There had been no attacks for a year and a half, not even on the last anniversary. Kushina wasn't sure if that meant people were finally becoming more understanding or that she had finally killed enough idiots to make her point clear. *Probably a combination of both but so long as they stop attacking Naruto I don't really care why.* So ten percent still hated him, ten percent loved him, and the other eighty percent? They got out of the way and kept their faces blank. What were they thinking? A Yamanka might have known but she didn't. Were the majority just better at hiding their hatreds or were they simply accepting of things? Time would tell she supposed.

---

"So what are you up to foreheads girl?" A loud blonde eight year old girl shouted.

"What do you mean Ino-pig?" A fierce pink haired girl replied.

"I know you're planning to sit near Sasuke-kun! Well go ahead and give it up! No one is getting Sasuke but me!"

"Sasuke -kun is going to fall in love with me Ino-pig! He and I share one soul! It's destiny!"

"Destiny! Let me tell you something I..." she suddenly noticed a small group entering the academy grounds. She noticed one person in particular. An extremely well dressed and muscular looking blonde boy. And he was walking hand in hand with a Hyuga.

"Hellooo earth to Ino-pig." Sakura snapped her fingers in front of her best friend / worst enemy. "What's wrong with you?"

"Hey Sakura who is *that*?" She pointed. "I thought I knew all the hot boys in Konoha but I've never seen him before."

Skaura took a look. "Hmmm, I don't know. But back to Sasuke, I..."

A dark haired girl who wore her hair in pigtails suddenly squealed. "It's *him!* " Dellona said.

" *Who?* " Ino asked really curious now.

Dellona gave them a dreamy smile. "The Yondaime's son!"

---

Upon reaching the academy grounds they stopped. Checking her watch she saw the kids had five minutes. She put a hand on her son's shoulder.

"Did you bring everything?" She asked him.

"Yes mom."

"Do you have your lunch?" He nodded. "Do you have your kunai and shuriken?"

"Yes *and* they're all sharpened."

"I see you have your sword." He wore it on his back like she did. "Is that sharp too?"

He frowned. "Well it's as sharp as I can get it, but it's just a regular old sword. Now if I had a katana..."

"No," she continued. "You have your radio communicator?"

"Of course, and it's preset to the emergency frequency."

"If anything happens just hit the send button and I will be here in less than two minutes."

"I know mom." He said in a bored tone. He loved her but she was treating him like a little kid!

"Now if anyone attacks you for *any* reason? Even if it's an instructor or someone in ANBU uniform?"

"I hit the communicator and fight with my sword."

"And when the sword is drawn?"

"When the sword is drawn ready it to take blood, for when the sword is drawn safety comes only in the death of your foes."

Kushina nodded, that was the correct answer, she hadn't expected anything less. She racked her brain trying to think of anything that might have been overlooked. "Oh! Naruto-kun did you put on clean underwear this morning?"

Hinata couldn't help herself she started giggling. Naruto put his head in his hands. "Mom *please* "

---

"The Yondaime's son!" Ino said excitedly. "I didn't know he was even going to be in our class. Dellona are you sure?"

The girl rolled her eyes. "Look at him for a second! He's practically a younger version of the Yondaime. Plus if that's not enough look who he's talking to. Red haired kunoichi with a sword and a Whirlpool hitai-ite."

Ino's jaw dropped. Of course she was the queen of all gossip and knew about everyone who was anyone. So of course she knew all about... "Namikaze Kushina! I don't believe it it's really her! The Red De... hmph!" Sakura slapped a hand over her mouth.

"Are you crazy!" Sakura whispered to her irate blonde friend. "You know the stories! If she hears you call her that she'll kill you!"

"No," Dellona said with certainty. "It's if you say her name three times in a row in a darkened room."

Another girl spoke up. "I heard that if she catches you alone after dark she'll cut your head off and bring it home with her."

"Well I heard that she comes to cut your head off if you do it before you get married." Another girl spoke up.

"Do what?" Sakura asked.

Ino finally managed to get her surprisingly strong friend's hand off her mouth. "Enough!" Ino turned to rail at Sakura and the other girls. "What is wrong with all of you! You give kunoichi a bad name! She's obviously *just* a powerful ninja and nothing else! I swear you're all a bunch of chickens! How are you going to be ninja if you're scared of a bunch of wild stories?"

"Oh really?" Sakura asked. "Well I don't see you going up to talk to her. If you're so brave go and say something to her."

"I would but I don't have anything to say." Ino replied.

Sakura grinned. "Sure, Ino-chicken, sure." A couple of the other girls began to make clucking sounds.

Ino's face darkened. There were two things she never allowed people to question. Her fashion sense and her courage. "Fine! I'll show you what a **real** kunoichi is." She headed to where the Whirlpool ninja was talking to the miniature Yondaime. Ino actually smiled. *Maybe I can make a really good impression on him.*

---

"Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked quietly. She was looking at the academy and other children nervously.

"Yes Hinata-chan?"

Looking into his clear blue eyes she found herself wishing she was more like him. He didn't have any weaknesses, she seemed to be nothing but. "Naruto-kun," she hesitated. She would never admit this

to her father but she felt sure the Namikazes and Kurenai would not tell him. And she was desperate for some comfort. "Naruto-kun I'm scared." She immediately cast her eyes down. "I know that I shouldn't be but I am."

"It's o.k. Hinata-chan, I'm a little scared too."

Her eyes shot up and she stared at him not believing it. " *You !*"

He grinned. "Yeah me, but it's all right because even though we're shinobi we're still human too. Being brave isn't about not feeling fear it's about overcoming the fear to do what you have to."

She began pressing her fingers together nervously. "Wha... what if you're not strong enough to overcome the fear?"

Naruto reached out and took both her hands into his. "Hinata-chan, I'm sure you have all the strength you need to meet any challenge. I believe in you."

Those were the kindest words she'd heard since her mother had passed. And they meant much more to her than Naruto would ever guess. "Naruto-kun I fe... feel..." *I feel courage when I look at you.* She swallowed; she wasn't quite that brave... yet. "I feel strong enough now, arigato."

Kushina smiled. "My Naruto-kun you've grown very wise! Maybe we shouldn't even bother with the academy after all. Maybe we should just give you the graduation test right now."

He looked at her excitedly. "If I pass it will you give me a katana?"

"No."

"Hello!"

They all turned to look at a young blonde girl in a purple dress and leg wrappings. "Hello." Kushina answered.



The girl immediately bowed to her. "I am Yamanaka Ino. This is my first day at the academy. I am hoping to make some new friends." She sent Naruto a huge smile. Hinata got the feeling that Ino didn't even see her. Ino looked at Kushina and spoke carefully as though she were treading a mine field. "Am I mistaken in believing that you are Namikaze Kushina? And that this is your very handsome son?"

Kushina gave the girl a slight nod. She didn't miss the way she was eying her son or the nervous way Hinata was pressing her index fingers together. Kushina let out a small sigh. *Well I wanted him to interact with his peers. He was bound to meet a girl besides Hinata sometime. I didn't expect the very first one to be quite so... friendly.* "I am Kushina and this is my son Naruto, Hyuga Hinata, and Yuha Kurenai. I am pleased to meet you Ino."

She offered Kushina another bow. "I am greatly honored to meet you Kushina-san." She turned her full attention to Naruto. "I am also very happy to meet *you* Naruto-kun."

Kushina raised an eyebrow. *Very friendly.*

Hinata stood there and simply pressed her index fingers together even more nervously. *Kun? She's just met him and she is already calling him Naruto -kun She's very pretty and very sure of herself, not like me.*

Naruto gave her a very wary smile and a slight bow. He wasn't sure what to make of her but he didn't want to offend anyone on the first day. "I am very happy to meet you as well Ino."

She laughed and put a hand on his arm. "Oh please call me Ino-chan!" She gave Hinata a quick glance. "And is this your friend?"

Naruto nodded. "Yes Hinata-chan is my very best friend."

Ino turned her full attention on Hinata now. She was still smiling, but the smile was not the same one she had given Kushina or Naruto. This one had something a bit predatory in it. "Oh Hinata-chan I hope

we can be friends too! It's so sweet that Naruto-kun thinks of you as his best friend. Most boys aren't comfortable having girls as *just* friends. It's nice that Naruto doesn't have trouble seeing you that way. Well I have to get to class I'll see you inside." She reached out and touched his arm again. "Bye Naruto-kun." As she walked away she put just a little bit of sway in her hips.

Hinata looked down at the ground. In about half a minute that girl had managed to make her feel completely ugly and plain. She obviously wasn't someone Naruto-kun would ever choose to be with.

"Weird." Naruto said. Without a thought he grabbed Hinata's hand and began leading her to the academy entrance. "Come on Hinata-chan we don't want to be late." He was looking at the academy so completely missed the look of relief on Hinata's face.

Kushina watched the two of them go with a shake of the head. It suddenly occurred to her that of all the lessons she had given her son on history, ethics, math, taijutsu, weapons, chakra control, and other subjects she hadn't spoken to him even once about girls and how to deal with them. She shook her head not believing she had completely forgotten something so vital. *Great I've sent him into battle completely unarmed. Well if he survives today I'll start explaining about girls tonight. After all the y' r e at least as dangerous to him as assassins*

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"Wow! I can't believe you actually talked to her Ino! What did she say?" Dellona was pulling on her pig tails excitedly.

"Forget her! What did *he* say, the Yondaime's son?" Another girl asked.

"Oh, you mean Naruto-kun?" She said indifferently.

" *Naruto -kun!!* You actually called him that!" Dellona practically screamed.

"I sure did." Ino sounded as though it were the least important thing in the world. "Let's get to class, I'll tell you all about talking to Naruto-kun in there."

"Hey Ino-pig! Don't think I didn't see what you did! You were flirting with him! How dare you do that to Sasuke-kun!"

Ino sent Sakura a self satisfied little smile. "Sasuke who?"

## First impressions

Naruto and Hinata stepped into the classroom together. Most of the children were all ready seated. Many of them seemed to know each other and there was loud chatter. Naruto looked at the seats trying to find a couple that were open next to each other.

"Who are you supposed to be?" A voice spoke to him.

Naruto looked over to the first row where a boy with black hair and dark eyes was looking amused. "Excuse me?" Naruto asked.

"What's with the get up?" The boy clarified. Naruto was wearing a black body suit with dark red stripes along the arms and legs. Beneath he wore his custom made body armor. Along his belt were several pouches and on his back he had a sword strapped on. But that wasn't what had gotten the other boy's attention. It was the cloak. Naruto had on a pristine white cloak with flames along the bottom. It was an exact replica of what his father had worn as Hokage. When Naruto wore it the resemblance was unmistakable.

"I wear it in honor of my father." Naruto said tightly. For him his father was a subject he could not speak of without strong feeling.

The boy chuckled thinking the new comer who was obviously just desperate to get attention. "Sure, you're just trying to be a fake Yondaime." The boy's chuckle was cut off when he suddenly felt a killer intent stronger than any he ever had. The blonde boy's hands were twitching and his eyes were looking at him with something dark and hateful. He wasn't the only one in the room who could sense such intense feeling. The talk in the classroom died away and everyone looked at the boy who was glaring at Sasuke.

Hinata could feel their eyes on her as well as the killer intent coming off Naruto. She felt like shrinking away. Naruto didn't seem to notice.

"My name is Namikaze Naruto," he said in a voice that was low and tight. "My father was Namikaze Minato the Yondaime Hokage."

Sasuke smiled and leaned back in his chair. "Oh so you're him huh? My father said I should stay away from you, that you were dangerous."

"Your father was right." He took a breath and brought his anger back under control. "What's your name?"

"Uchiha Sasuke."

Naruto smiled. "Well Sasuke my first impression is that you're a jerk." He reached back to take hold of Hinata's hand again. "Come on Hinata there are a couple seats in the top row."

Sasuke watched him go with a smirk. His mom might be dangerous, but he was nothing special.

---

Ino watched as the two of them passed her. Seeing her Naruto gave a quick nod which she took as proof of his infatuation with her. "He is sooo cool." She sighed.

"You're drooling." A bored voice next to her said.

"Shut up you lazy jerk! Don't disturb me when I'm thinking about my one true love!"

"Yours and every other girls, I almost feel sorry for Sasuke."

"Hah!" She gave the sleepy boy next to her a triumphant smile.

"Shows what you know! I am sooo over Sasuke."

"Oh?" Shikamaru somehow found the energy to lift one eyebrow.

"Who's your latest victim? Ow!" He rubbed the back of his head.

"Hmph! Well it just so happens that I have fallen completely in love with Namikaze Naruto."

Shikamaru craned his neck to look at the seats on the top row across from him. For him this was a huge effort. He looked at the boy sitting talking to a girl who was obviously a Hyuga. His get up was obviously meant to draw attention. "My folks told me to be very careful around him but they wouldn't say why." He shrugged. "Not that they needed to, given who his mom is." Every child in the classroom had been told more or less the same thing about Naruto. The exact words and the degree of vehemence varied but the basic message was the same. Stay away. And none of them would say why exactly. Of course all the children were smart enough to figure out the reason. His mother was someone so scary mothers used her to frighten their children. It was easy to understand why the parents would want their children to keep clear of *her* son. "Any way he doesn't look dangerous."

"Oh he is!" She looked over dreamily. "You can tell just by looking at him." For Ino and most of the other girls the fact that her parents had warned her to stay away from him only made him even *more* attractive. He was dangerous. She even liked those weird scars on his cheeks. They gave him an exotic sort of feral look. He was definitely one of a kind!

She was starting to drool again. Shikamaru decided saying anything more would be troublesome so he put his head back down and tried to take a nap.

---

Iruka and Mizuki both stood in the doorway observing the class for a moment. They had both witnessed the confrontation between Sasuke and Naruto. They had been on the point of intervening when Naruto brought his killer intent back under control.

"So what do you think?" Mizuki asked.

Iruka sighed. "I think these are going to be a very interesting four years." He gave Mizuki a small grin. "He really does look like him doesn't he?"

Mizuki nodded warily. "On the outside he does." But then he smiled. "He certainly doesn't lack confidence."

"We have an Uchiha, a Hyuga, and a Namikaze in one class. This has got to be the first time that's happened in at least twenty years." Iruka sighed. "At least he seems to be getting along with the Hyuga girl; hopefully he learns to get along with the Uchiha as well."

"Somehow I don't think that's going to happen." He looked at his watch. "It's eight."

Iruka nodded. "Right." With that he and Mizuki entered the classroom. The children quickly quieted down when they saw them. Iruka took a spot directly in front of their seats. He gave them all a smile and motioned for silence. After a moment he spoke. "Hello children, my name is Umino Iruka, and this is my associate Menos Mizuki. You will refer to us as Iruka-sensei and Mizuki-sensei. For the next four years while you are here we will be your primary instructors in the ninja arts. While you are here in this classroom or in the dojo or in the practice fields you are our responsibility. In the mornings we will concentrate on texts and written materials. At these times I will usually be in charge. In the afternoons, after lunch, you will receive physical exercise and training in taijutsu and basic weapons. At these times Mizuki will normally be in charge of you. Along with this standard instruction you can also expect to go on several field trips to develop survival skills. Now to help us to get to know each other I would like each of you to stand up and tell us who you are and what you hope to become." One by one the students did so."

"I want," munch munch munch. "To be just like my dad and show everyone that a pleasantly plump person can be a great ninja."

"Hmph, I want to be an ordinary ninja, have an ordinary career, marry a girl who is not too pretty or too ugly, have two kids a girl and then a boy, retire when my daughter marries and my son becomes a ninja, and then enjoy a peaceful and carefree retirement until I die before my wife."

"I want to prove that a kunoichi can be beautiful and powerful. And I want to win the love of a special someone." The girl turned around and blew Naruto a kiss. Naruto had no idea what to think of this while Hinata began to press her index fingers again.

"I want to be a good kunoichi and I also want..." the girl looked at Sasuke and dissolved into giggles.

"My name is Uchiha Sasuke. I want to prove myself worthy of my father's respect and to match my niisan."

"I seek to master all of my clan's jutsus and to eventually help breed a new species of kikai bug."

"I want to become a great ninja and fight with my dog Akamaru!"

As her turn approached she began to panic at the thought of all those people looking her and her having to talk. But then she felt Naruto's hand cover hers. He could always tell when she was really nervous. He leaned in and whispered to her.

"Don't worry Hinata-chan; I know you'll be fine."

She smiled at him and nodded. "Arigato, Naruto-kun." It was amazing how just his touch and just a few words could set her mind at ease. When her turn came she stood and spoke in a clear voice. "I am Hyuga Hinata. I wish to become a strong leader for my clan and to earn my father's respect, and the respect of one other person." She sat back down relieved she had managed to get through that without a stutter.

Naruto slowly stood. "I am Namikaze Naruto. I have only one goal, an ambition really. I want to be the greatest Hokage that Konoha has ever seen." No one laughed at him. For they all knew that such a thing was hardly impossible for one with the Namikaze name and the blood of a Hokage in his veins.



Iruka nodded well satisfied with how well it had gone. Most of them lacked a strong sense of purpose and fell back on the standard answer of just being a great ninja or kunoichi. That was normal; while they were here they would develop a strong sense of what they wanted or they would wash out. Some of them already possessed a very strong sense of purpose, his eyes drifted back up to Naruto.

"Well thank you, that was very informative. You can trust both Mizuki and myself to do everything we can to help each and every one of you to reach your goals. Now we need to get an idea of your abilities. To begin with can any of you use a jutsu?" He didn't expect anyone to raise their hands. At this age only someone who was a genius would be able to mold chakra. But to his very great surprise not one but three hands rose. *Well this should be interesting.* "Very well, Sasuke, Shikamaru, and Naruto come down here please." The three boys were soon standing before him. "All right who would like to go first?"

Shikamaru spoke up. "Man this is a drag, let me go so I can rest again."

Iruka frowned at him. "You should be well rested when you come here each day. There is no excuse for not being ready for a full day when you arrive here. In any case please show me your jutsu."

Shikamaru nodded and went through some hand signs. " **Shadow Possession Technique.** " His shadow flowed five feet until it merged with Iruka's. Iruka was compelled to put his hands on his head and begin dancing around, mimicking Shikamaru and greatly amusing everyone in the class.

"All right that's enough!" Iruka called out. Shikamaru ended the jutsu and Iruka tried to regather his dignity. "Thank you Shikamaru, that was very impressive." Shikamaru nodded and slouched back to his seat. "Sasuke why don't you go next?"

The boy smirked. "Can we go outside? It's a fire jutsu."

Iruka nodded. "All right class we're going outside." After about five minutes the class and instructors had assembled on the asphalt outside. "All right Sasuke please demonstrate."

Sasuke ran through the hand signs. " **Fireball Technique.** " From his mouth a boulder of fire at least five feet across appeared. He let it land on the asphalt. He heard the other kids all shout and applaud of course. He calmly turned back to his stunned instructors; both of them were gaping at him. "Very, very impressive Sasuke!" Iruka praised.

"The power of the Uchiha clan." Mizuki said with a little bit of awe.

Smiling happily he headed back to rejoin the other students. As he passed Naruto he smiled at him. "Top that fake Yondaime."

Naruto shot him daggers from his eyes as the smug little genius passed him. His hands twitched and he longed to take out his sword. He did manage to keep his killer intent from spiking though. *Oh I'll top that you arrogant little jerk!* When Iruka called him forward he decided to put as much chakra as he could into this. He thought this might go well. He was seriously pissed off at the moment and he'd found that whenever he got really angry he seemed to have more chakra than usual. He thought of it as red chakra and it always felt different from his regular chakra, he could feel it in him now. He went through the hand signs. " **Shadow Clone Technique.** " And then just for an instant the entire area was covered with smoke. When the smoke lifted Iruka, Mizuki, and the class were entirely surrounded by about two hundred clones.

"What?!" Mizuki stared out in complete shock. He wasn't the only one the entire class was shouting and pointing.

Iruka reached out and actually touched the two nearest clones. Sure enough they weren't illusions. "Naruto! How on earth did you do that?!"

"What do you mean?"

He looked at the one who had answered. "Shadow clones are a high level Jonin jutsu. How did you learn it?"

"Oh, well my mom tried teaching me how to make regular bushins but I was terrible at it, still am. It turns out I have a **lot** of chakra capacity, even more than my mom has. She finally realized that the reason I couldn't make bushins was that I have trouble controlling very small amounts of chakra. I actually have an easier time with jutsus that require lots of chakra. So she had me learn how to make shadow clones."

"But it's a forbidden jutsu," Mizuki spoke up. "How did you get access to it?"

"It's in my family library." Naruto replied casually.

"Really?" Mizuki said. *Well now this has possibilities!*

"Naruto just how long did it take you to learn this?" Iruka asked.

Naruto shrugged. "It just took a few hours, it wasn't that hard." Now Iruka and Mizuki were both staring at him open mouthed. "What?"

Iruka shook his head. He had learned an A rank jutsu in a few hours and performed it better than anyone below Kage level could.

"Naruto, do you know I truly believe that you just may be Hokage one day." Mizuki gave him a surprised look. The students were whispering among themselves repeating what Iruka had just said.

Naruto gave Iruka a huge grin. "You mean that Iruka-sensei?"

Iruka nodded solemnly. "If you can do this much now you're likely already at Jonin level, definitely high Chunin. In fact if you like I'd be willing to give you the graduation test now. If your scholastic knowledge is good you could definitely pass it and become a Genin right now."

*What?! No way can that loser be stronger than me! The way they're talking about him sounds like the way they talk about niisan! I'm an Uchiha he can't be better than me!* Sasuke thought venomously.

*Oh Naruto-kun I am so proud of you! You truly are amazing and I know you'll be a great Hokage. Because you can do anything you truly want.* Hinata thought proudly but sadly. *How will I get through school without you?*

*Oh no! I can't lose Naruto-kun now! How can I make him fall completely in love with me if I'm stuck here while he's doing missions?* Ino thought desperately.

*Damn it this is not good.* Mizuki thought of arguments against giving Naruto the graduation test now. It was rare but not unheard of. But fortunately Naruto shook his head.

"Thanks' Iruka-sensei, but my mom already told me she wants me to stay in for the full four years. She says I need to develop my social skills."

Iruka nodded. "All right but please tell your mother that I am prepared to administer the test at any time." Naruto nodded happily. "So do you know any other jutsus?"

"About a dozen." He said without concern.

He smirked. "Anything interesting?" If he knew shadow clones it only made sense he would know other lower level jutsus. But nothing could top what he'd done already.

"Well I can summon."

Iruka looked at him carefully. "Show me please, uhm but first would you mind dismissing your clones?"

"No problem." With a thought he got rid of all his clones. Then he bit down on his thumb. **"Summoning Technique."** He slammed his

hand onto the asphalt. With a large puff of smoke a five foot tall red and black frog was there.

Iruka nodded. "I knew the Yondaime could summon frogs. But for you to do so you have to sign a contract. How were you able to do that?"

Naruto smiled. "Oh granddad let me."

"Granddad?"

"Jiraiya, he was my father's sensei and he drops by to see me whenever he's in town."

"You've had the great Jiraiya teach you? You've had one of the Sanin as a sensei?"

"Well, I don't know if you can really call him my sensei. He just shows me a few things like summoning and then he goes off to do 'research' somewhere. Tsunade's even worse, I only get to see her once year. And she always wants to show me how to do medical jutsu." He shook his head.

Iruka and Mizuki were staring at him again. "I don't suppose Orochimaru visits you too does he?" Iruka asked.

"Who?"

"Never mind, all right Naruto very, very impressive. All right let's get back to the classroom."

---

He and Hinata had found a table in the cafeteria and were sitting down to eat.

"What did you bring for lunch Naruto-kun?"

Naruto gave her a very happy smile. "Oh it's a real treat mom made her special ramen for me! I wish she would make it for me more

often. But she says it's not healthy for me and stunts your growth."

"Well Naruto-kun if you ate ramen all the time you probably wouldn't be taller than me." Hinata tried to point out the positive.

"Can I sit with you Naruto-kun?"

Naruto turned around to see Ino standing beside him with a tray. "Oh sure Ino."

Smiling she took the seat across from him. She gave Hinata who was sitting next to him a very slight and quick frown. "Oh Hinata-chan, are you doing anything later after class?"

"Uhm n... no, why?"

"Well Hinata-chan I thought if you like I could take you shopping with me. I mean we could get you something to wear that actually shows off your feminine side. You know instead of the gender neutral clothes you have on now. I mean the only reason to wear a bulky beige jacket is if your embarrassed by your figure. That's not the reason you wear it is it Hinata-chan?"

Hinata felt herself wanting to shrink again. "Uhm no." She said in a small voice.

"I mean if it is that's nothing to be ashamed of. Some girls are just late bloomers."

Naruto looked at her. "Ino we're all eight year olds, no one has yet."

"Well you have Naruto-kun." She reached across the table to touch his forearm. "Oooh! You are sooo muscular! How did you get so strong?"

"Weight training and regular exercises."

"Can you give me some tips? I would love to see what you do!"

Naruto shrugged. "All right, what are you doing this Saturday?"

She beamed at him. "Nothing, nothing at all Naruto-kun!"

"Would you like to join me and my mom for training?"

The smile slipped a bit. *No this is fine! I'll just impress him and his mom with my ability and we can have a real date later on. I mean it's still more than Sasuke ever agreed to!* "That sounds great Naruto-kun. I'd be happy to join you."

"Uhm, you mi... might want to re... reconsider that." Hinata spoke up. "Their training sessions can be very extreme."

She gave Hinata a smug smile. "Have you trained with him?"

She nodded. "I don't do all the exercises, but I do about half of them."

"Well I'm sure that if *you* can handle half of them I'll be able to do most of them."

"Hey Hinata-chan why don't you come by Saturday too? We can all train together." Naruto said.

Hinata looked at Ino and sent the girl a tiny grin. "I'd like that Naruto-kun."

"Great! I'll see both of you there at seven." Naruto said.

"In the morning?" Ino said startled.

Naruto nodded. "Be sure to have a big breakfast you'll really need the energy and we won't stop until noon."

"Your workouts last five hours?" the color began to drain from her face.

"Oh no Ino," Naruto said. "The workouts last ten hours. Five hours is as long as Hinata-chan can last. Is that a problem?"

Her smile looked a bit shaky but she shook her head.

"Naruto would you mind if we join you?" Naruto looked up to see three girls all smiling at him and holding trays of food.

He nodded and gave them all an inviting smile. The kids sure were friendly! But why did Hinata look so worried?



## Advice and a question

"It's not a problem that I invited her is it mom?" Naruto asked as the four of them were heading back from the academy.

"No, honey of course not. I want you to make friends. You are welcome to invite whoever you like home just let me know." She stopped to pick up a couple of pebbles. "Inviting friends over is fine." In a blur she threw the two pebbles at a large tree they were passing underneath.

"Ow!"

"Ow!"

Two eight year old girls dropped out of the tree onto the street. Kushina stood over them frowning with arms crossed. "Why are you following us?"

Dellona looked up in a panic for her life. "Please don't kill us!" She wailed

Kushina shut her eyes and shook her head. "I'm not going to hurt you. But don't stalk my son. If he wants to see you after school he'll invite you. But if he doesn't I expect you to leave him be."

"We weren't stalking Naruto-kun! We just wanted to see where he was going!" Dellona said.

"Did he know that?"

"Uhm no." Dellona said weakly.

"That's stalking, don't do it again. Now go." The two girls wasted no time running away. Kushina returned to her son's side. "Tell me something Naruto-kun, how many girls had lunch with you today?"

"Not counting Hinata, seven."

"Well its official then." Kushina said in a flat voice.

"What?"

"You have a fan club." She took out a kunai and tossed it at a trash can. The can flipped end over end spilling garbage over the eight year old girl who had been hiding behind it.

"Eek!" the girl shouted in terror.

"Go home and don't follow my son again." The girl fled. She gave her son a look that was amused and annoyed at the same time. "My son the heart throb."

"It's o.k. mom I'll just tell the girls to leave me alone tomorrow."

Kushina, Kurenai, and even Hinata looked at him as though he were an idiot. "Uhm, Naruto-kun I really don't think that will do any good." Hinata said quietly.

"Why not?"

"Because Naruto-kun you're not a person to them, you're an ideal." Kushina said as she picked up another pebble.

"Huh?"

Kushina threw the pebble and a young girl in a yellow dress fell out of a tree. "You, stalking, bad, don't!" She shouted as the girl ran for her life. "Now as I was saying, except for Hinata did any of those girls today really know you? I mean other than your name, your ambition, and the fact that you are all ready powerful?"

"Well no." He said.

"Yet they're willing to risk a **terrible and painful death.**" She shouted the last part and came to a halt. "Every girl who has been

following my son has until the count of five to get out of here before I take out my sword and start cutting off heads... **five!** " Immediately six different girls came out of their hiding places and began to run away screaming. She looked at her son. "None of these girls actually think they're going to get you. So just telling them you're not interested won't help. You're an ideal to them now."

"An ideal?"

Kushina nodded. "They look at you and see the perfect and unattainable. Being with you is a magical quest. They know the attempt is bound to fail but they still want to try because you represent an ideal to these girls of everything they imagine they want in a boyfriend. They want to pursue you because in an odd way they think it brings them closer to this perfection they can never really have."

"So what can I do mom?"

Kushina frowned. "Well if you'd known what to do you might have nipped this in the bud. But I neglected to tell you how to handle things." She sighed. "Unfortunately now that the fan club has actually formed you're left with only two options. One option would be to ruin the reputation you have now. You could answer every question wrong, try to be loud and obnoxious, start playing a bunch of annoying pranks, and maybe replace the Hokage cloak with a bright orange jumpsuit."

Naruto looked at her in horror. "Mom don't even joke about that!"

Kushina grinned. "Well that leaves option two. Get a girlfriend."

*What?!* Hinata thought.

"What?!" Naruto cried out. "Mom I thought I was trying to get the girls to leave me alone."

Kushina nodded. "That's the goal Naruto-kun."

"How does having a girlfriend help with having girls chase after me?"

"Simple, by having *one* girlfriend you immediately ruin the ideal all the other girls have. Even if you are unattainable they still want to only chase boys who are unattached. If you have a girlfriend that will take the steam out of most of the fan girls."

Naruto frowned at her. "I don't know mom. I mean even if I wanted to which girl would I pick?"

Kushina raised an eyebrow. "Well son who would you feel comfortable spending time with, being alone with, and maybe even walking around hand in hand with?" She glanced to where Naruto and Hinata were holding hands.

Naruto seemed to struggle. "That's just it mom! I don't feel comfortable with any of them! The only person in the whole class I feel comfortable around is Hinata-chan."

Kushina just looked at her son blankly for a bit and waited. He didn't seem to get it. Finally she asked. "Who?"

"Hinata-chan."

She cupped a hand to her ear. "Who?"

He frowned at her. "I said Hinata-chan! I feel comfortable around Hinata-chan!" And then the light seemed to come on. "Oh! I could have Hinata-chan be my girlfriend."

Kushina smiled. "Why Naruto-kun what a wonderful idea! Asking the girl you know and trust."

But Naruto frowned. "I don't think it would work though."

"Uhm, why n... not Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked.

He looked at her in surprise. "Come on Hinata-chan! Can you see me as your boyfriend?"

Hinata hung her head and didn't bother to answer.

Kushina looked on but decided to not say anything. *If he doesn't see it there's no point trying to force things. Well they're both young. All good things in time.* "Well Naruto-kun I hope you enjoy being an ideal."

"Great." He began looking around wondering if there were any more girls following him.

Kushina picked up a pebble. "Well on the bright side this should be good preparation for when you become Hokage. Most of the villagers never met your father but they loved and idolized him." She threw the pebble into some bushes in the front of a residence.

"Ow!" the bush cried out.

"Though the villagers didn't stalk him."

---

They made it back to the Namikaze estates without saying much more. They also made it running into only two more fan girls.

"Naruto-kun go on in I'll be a minute." Naruto nodded and went in through the gate. Once he was out of hearing she turned to Hinata. "Hinata-chan I would like to talk to you for a minute."

Kurenai looked at Kushina. "Would you like some privacy?"

Kushina shook her head. "I don't mind if you hear this Kurenai." She smiled at Hinata. "This will just be between us girls."

"What is it Kushina?" Hinata asked morosely.

Kushina reached out and gently put a hand on each shoulder. "Hinata-chan don't give up on him."

She looked surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said, don't give up on him or on the idea of being with him eventually. I know it doesn't seem like it right now, but Naruto thinks the world of you. And I know just how deeply you care about him too."

She sighed. "Naruto-kun doesn't even see me as a potential girlfriend."

"Right now he doesn't, but Hinata-chan you are both still so very young. Things can change with time. But the important thing is that today wasn't a decisive moment so don't worry too much."

"Decisive moment?"

Kushina smiled kindly. "In all of our lives Hinata-chan there come a certain number of decisive moments. These are crossroads in our life's journey. They are times when your life can move into one or another very different path. Would you like to hear about mine?" Hinata nodded eagerly. "Well not too surprisingly mine involved a certain man. Would you like to hear how Minato and I came to be?"

"Oh yes please!"

"Well he was in Whirlpool country commanding a small force of Leaf nins that were there to help us drive out some damn Rock nins from our territory. I worked with him closely and from the very start we flirted with one another mercilessly." She stopped and smiled fondly at the memory. "Any way after a month the Rock nins had been driven out and Minato was going to lead his men back home. We were saying our good byes. And as I was saying good bye to him I just knew it was a decisive moment in my life. He wasn't Hokage then, but he was the Yellow Flash of Konoha, a ninja legend, and the most beautiful man I ever laid eyes on. I knew that I would probably never see him again and my heart ached at the thought. It was a decisive moment and I decided to follow my heart."

"What did you do?" Hinata asked wide eyed.

Kushina's eyes warmed. "I grabbed him and gave him the most passionate kiss of my life."

Hinata gasped. "You didn't!"

Kushina laughed. "Oh yes I did! And you should have seen the look on his face! But you see Hinata-chan everything else that happened; our falling in love, our marriage, and the birth of our son all started from that decision to follow my heart. I took a chance and if I hadn't then none of it would have happened. Do you understand what I am telling you Hinata-chan? When *your* decisive moment comes listen to your heart and follow its dictates, no matter how frightening."

Hinata looked down again and began pressing her fingers together. "Wha... what if yo... you're not strong en... enough to fo... follow your heart?"

Kushina paused for a bit and really regretted what she was about to say. "Then you don't deserve him."

Hinata gasped and her face shot back up. "What?"

Kushina went down on her knees while keeping a gentle hold on Hinata's shoulders. "Hinata-chan you are a dear sweet child and I am very fond of you. I do not doubt that you will grow into a fine woman and one day be a fine wife. But Naruto-kun is no ordinary person. He is going to be an extraordinary man just as his father was. And for such a man an ordinary wife will never do. Until now his life has been hard and it will only get harder. There are things about him that you do not know, terrible things. Within him is an unlimited potential not only for greatness but for the tragic as well. From the day of his birth until the day his life ends his life will be a bitter struggle against enemies you cannot imagine both within and without. I believe he will triumph in the end no matter the odds, because he has within him his father's courage. He has that rare strength to do what must be done whatever the cost." She paused for a bit and Hinata was entranced, she hung on every word. She knew this was vitally important. Kushina's green eyes bored into

Hinata's lavender ones. "When I took my marriage vows I pledged *everything* to be with him. My life, my heart, my very soul; I offered everything I was and ever would be so I could be with the one I loved. For to be with a truly great man nothing less would ever have been enough. Can you do the same Hinata-chan? Can you pledge *everything* to be with him? Can you offer your life, your heart, and your very soul to stand beside him? Do you love him *that* much? Because if you cannot give him everything that you are and ever could be then you do not deserve him."

The little girl looked at her stunned and lost. "Kushina I... I..."

"Shhh," Kushina put a finger to her lips and shushed her. "You don't have to answer me now. In fact you don't have to answer me at all. But one day Hinata-chan, likely years from now, your moment will come and you will have to answer then." She leaned forward and gave the small child a kiss on her forehead. "Good night Hinata-chan. I will see you in the morning." With that she left to return to her home and her son.



## Surprise meeting

The first three weeks at the academy went well. Naruto found nothing hard in either Iruka's lessons or in Mizuki-sensei's. He excelled in all the subjects with relative ease. The truth was there was nothing he was being taught that his mother had not already covered and gone far beyond. His mom had given him a crash course on girls and taught him how to be polite to them without encouraging them too much. Ultimately he had decided not to get a girlfriend and simply endure the attention of most of his female classmates. At least the stalking had come to a stop after a couple days. His mom had taken out her sword and swung it around her head while unleashing a high pitched and ungulating battle cry. After that the girls settled for showing him attention in the classroom. Ino maintained her flirtatious ways and Naruto put up with it more or less with good humor. Throughout Hinata was always the one at his side. She had begun to train with him and his mom more. Hinata remained his absolute best friend but he also began to make another close friend.

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"Checkmate." A lazy boy said.

Naruto sat back and studied the board for a moment. "You surprised me. Want to play again?"

Shikamaru nodded. "You know Naruto I have to give you credit you're the only one besides my dad who will play with me on a regular basis. You're also the only person besides him to ever beat me." He began to set the board up again.

Naruto shrugged. "I like playing with you Shika, it's a challenge and the games help me develop my strategic thinking." He looked at him suspiciously. "You know you are a lot smarter than you like to let on. Why don't you try harder? Or even try a little. I mean you're the dead last in the class!"

Shikamaru sent him a disinterested look. "So?"

Naruto frowned at him. "So? So don't you want to be as good as you possibly can? Don't you want to be great?"

"Too troublesome, I just want to be average. Why do you want to excel so much?"

"Because I want to be the greatest Hokage Konoha has ever seen." He said almost automatically.

Shikamaru smiled. "Greatest? Wouldn't just being Hokage be enough for you?"

"No," Naruto said seriously. "My father was the hero who saved this village from the Kyuubi. He gave everything to save Konoha. I want to be like him and even greater. I love Konoha and its people and I want to protect them and keep them safe. And I want to be better than any who came before otherwise what's the point?"

"That won't leave you very much time for watching clouds or playing shogi." Shikamaru pointed out.

"No, but if I can keep Konoha safe I'll gladly make that sacrifice."

Shikamaru smiled "Spoken like a real Hokage."

"Would you boys like some cookies?" She entered the game room with a tray. "They're still hot."

"Thanks mom." Naruto said.

"Thank you."

She smiled at the two boys. This was the first time he'd brought over a male friend. She chuckled thinking about the first time he'd brought over a female.

---

"Ten miles?" Ino paled.

Naruto smiled at her. "It's a really good warm up, once you're done your body is warm and loose and you can hit the obstacle course."

"Obstacle course?"

"Come on I'll show you." He led her to the other side of the mansion and pointed out its features. "You wade through the mud pit, go through the monkey bars, swim across the pond, chakra walk up the one hundred foot tower, and then down the zip line." Ino looked at him uncomfortably and wondered what he would think if she told him she couldn't swim or chakra walk and really wasn't eager to go waist deep in mud. "So we'll normally do the course five times. Then we'll start on the taijutsu sparing, just so you know my mom knows a few medical jutsus so don't worry when you spar with her."

She thought her heart stopped. "Whoa! Hold it! I'm going to spar your mother? I was sort of hoping to spar with you Naruto-kun."

"Well I'm sure you were dear." Kushina said to her with a smile. "But I want to see what you're made of. Don't worry I probably won't break any bones and if I do I'll get you the hospital very quickly."

Naruto frowned at his mother. "Mom you said you would take it easy on her."

Kushina shrugged. "I *said* I wouldn't break any bones."

"Anyway after that we usually break for an hour to eat lunch. After lunch we'll do basic exercises to build up strength and endurance. A thousand pushups, a thousand sit ups, a thousand crunches, fifteen hundred jumping jacks and five hundred pull ups."

Ino stared at him and his mom praying that they would burst out into laughter and tell her they were kidding.

"Then after that it's time for weapons training. My mom and I will work on sword work but you're free to work on shuriken and kunai. Then we finish off with a relaxing five mile run."

Ino stared at him. "And this is your regular work out?"

He nodded. "On days when I'm not in school. On school days I have a three hour workout." He frowned at his mother. "I'd do more but she doesn't want me to exhaust myself. So any way you ready to go?"

She grinned weakly. "Sure."

"You ready Hinata-chan?"

"Of course Naruto-kun."

"All right! Let's have a really great work out!" Naruto said excitedly and led the four of them along the trail that ran around the estates.

After about one hundred yards.

"OW! Oh ow, ow! It hurts." Ino collapsed to the ground and grabbed at her ankle.

Naruto was quickly kneeling at her side with Kushina and Hinata standing a bit behind him.

"What happened?" Naruto asked.

"Oh Naruto-kun I am sooo sorry! But I twisted my ankle!" Ino said bravely.

"Oh that's too bad Ino! Are you all right?" Naruto sympathized.

"What incredible bad luck." Kushina said. "It really is *unbelievable* ." Hinata giggled.

"Naruto-kun I hate to do this but I won't be able to work out with you. Would you mind carrying me home?" She asked pleadingly.

"You know Ino my mom could probably heal you." Naruto said.

"No! Uh, I mean, I don't want to trouble her. I think it would be best if you could just get me home."

"Well o.k. Ino." Naruto made to pick her up but his mom put her hand on his shoulder.

"Actually Naruto-kun as the adult it's my responsibility to get her safely home." Kushina said.

"I would really prefer if Naruto-kun carried me." Ino pleaded.

"I am sure you would dear." Kushina picked her up. "You two continue on I'll be back in a few minutes." She leapt away without even giving Ino a chance to say anything more.

Naruto looked over to Hinata. "Hinata-chan why are you laughing?"

"Oh no reason Naruto-kun." She tried but couldn't stop laughing.

---

"Listen Naruto, I'm having a birthday next week. And even though it's troublesome my parents are throwing me a party. You want to come?" Both Naruto and his mom were taken by surprise and stared at him. "Did I say something wrong?"

"Shikamaru," Kushina said carefully. "Do your parents know you wish to invite Naruto?"

"Of course," he answered without concern. "I wouldn't have asked him without being sure my mom wouldn't be troublesome. My folks say that if I want you to come you're welcome."

Naruto looked excitedly at his mom. "Mom can I?"

Kushina smiled and nodded. "Of course son." She looked to Shikamaru and actually gave him a slight bow. "Shikamaru, thank you for extending this invitation to my son."

---

"Are you coming in with us mom?" Naruto asked.

Kushina smiled. She had of course escorted her son and Hinata to the Nara residence. "No Naruto-kun, you and Hinata go in and have a good time I'll be here when you're ready to return." With that she leapt away. They had each brought a gift and as they approached the front door they could hear the sound of music and the high pitched laughter of children. As they stood ready to ring the bell Hinata noticed something.

"Naruto-kun you look nervous."

"I am Hinata-chan. This is the first time I've ever been invited to a friend's house. I mean except for all the times I stayed at Hyuga."

Hinata smiled easily. She found it to be an odd role reversal to be the confident one for a change. "I have been to many formal dinners and functions; it'll be fine Naruto-kun. You have been invited and I know your manners are excellent."

"I guess you're right." He reached out and rang the door bell. The door was opened a moment later by a man who looked like an older version of Shikamaru with some facial scars. Naruto and Hinata both bowed. "Thank you for welcoming to your home Shikaku-san" His mother had been sure to inform him of the names of both of Shika's parents.

"Yes," Hinata added. "We are both very happy to have been extended invitations to your son's birthday party."

Shikaku gave them both an easy grin. "No need to be so formal, you can call me Shikaku. Come on in you are both welcome."

They entered hand in hand. Most of their classmates were already there. The girls who were there immediately noticed him entering with his usual Hokage cloak. As the girls swarmed towards him he tightened his grip on Hinata's hand. "Please don't leave me Hinata-chan." He whispered to her not wanting to be trapped by a pack of them.

Hearing him say those words she blushed a bit and smiled. "I won't leave you Naruto-kun."

---

"Wow." Dellona said dreamily.

"Beautiful." Another girl cooed.

"Sooo graceful." Ino sighed.

"Oh he's not that good!" An annoyed Sakura said. "Sasuke is a much better dancer.

"Oh yeah?" Ino smirked. "How would you even know forehead, I haven't seen him dance."

"He said he might dance with me later." Sakura said defensively.

"Don't hold your breath." Ino said flatly.

Stung Sakura shot back. "Oh yeah Ino-pig well I haven't seen him dance with you yet. The only one he has danced with is Hinata."

"I know." Ino frowned. She really, really wanted to dance with him.

---

Hinata had never enjoyed herself so much at a party. The formal functions she went to as part of her responsibility as the Hyuga heir were always dry, boring, and lifeless. The only parties she had ever attended that she had really enjoyed were Naruto's birthday parties. And this was better because they had never *danced* before. Dancing

had never been a part of those celebrations. But here a space had been cleared in the living room and music was playing loudly. All the girls wanted to dance with him. But he did not really feel comfortable with anyone but her and so the two of them danced exclusively. And she had discovered he was a marvelous dancer. She knew why of course. She had watched him train with his sword many, many times. Unlike using kunai or shuriken, a large part of using a sword effectively was proper footwork. The fighting styles were actually called 'dances' and he had mastered one of them; the dance of the camellia. Watching the way he could move and flow with his sword was beautiful, and those movements transferred well to the dance floor. She had never danced with him before and just loved the shared movement and the feel of all his attention focused solely on her. As they danced the song they were listening to ended. The next song was a slow one. The two of them stopped for a moment and looked around. There were six other couples dancing when the song came on four of them decided to leave the dance floor. The other two danced close with the boy holding the girl around her back just above her hips. Hinata expected he would want to take a break from dancing. But instead Naruto grabbed her around her hips and pulled her close.

"Eek!" The sound came out of her before she could stop it.

Naruto gave her a look of surprise. "Is something wrong Hinata-chan?"

"N... no Naruto-kun." He shrugged and pulled her close like the other two couples who were dancing. It took her just a moment to settle down being so close to him, but she slowly did and put her head down on his shoulder. Once she did manage to calm down she sort of regretted having her big beige coat on. She shut her eyes and just relaxed as they slowly moved in rhythm to the music. She let out a contented sigh. *Naruto-kun.*

---

Sakura saw the way Ino was looking at the two of them. "Jealous much Ino-pig?"



Ino gave her a nasty grin. "Isn't it time for you to go up to Sasuke and get ignored again?"

Ino looked back at the two of them. *Well aren't they cute But it won't last. She is not his type.*

---

"Why are you smiling like that?" Naruto asked suspiciously.

"Like what Naruto-kun?" His mother asked innocently. They had dropped off Hinata and were going up the walkway to the front door.

"Like you know something." Naruto accused.

"Like what?"

"I don't know."

Kushina patted her son's shoulder. "Naruto-kun really, are you suspicious of your own mother?"

He looked a bit embarrassed. "No, of course not, I'm sorry mom."

"That's all right son I forgive you." She opened the front door and they both entered the mansion. "By the way son, you and Hinata made the *cutest* couple on the dance floor." His mom gave him a huge smile.

"Mom! You were spying on me!" Naruto accused.

"I prefer to call it protective surveillance."

---

They were gathered in the dojo. After making certain all the students at least knew the basics Mizuki had told them it was time for them to begin sparring one another. The academy was designed to foster competition. The students were encouraged to develop their individual excellence. Teamwork was also important of course and

there were team building exercises as well. But the atmosphere was deliberately kept competitive.

"All right everyone, to begin with we will have the boys fight the boys and then the girls will fight each other." Mizuki announced. "Once we have a pecking order of the strongest and weakest in each group we will begin having the boys and girls fight each other as well. Now I want all of you to fight as hard as you can. Keep in mind that someday you will have to fight for your lives. Do not get into the habit of holding back. I want all of you to do your absolute best!" He smiled at all of them. "With that in mind we are not here to deliberately hurt anyone. If someone is hurt during the match no one will find any fault with that. But please do not strike a fallen or unconscious opponent. If I tell you to stop do so immediately and take a couple steps back. Also, if you see blood please halt." As he'd known it would the last comment got their attention. Most looked just a little bit uncomfortable. Mizuki knew that was good. Up until now most of them had only sparred with family or friends who held back from hurting them. It was time for them to fight with the understanding that they could be hurt. *Time to toughen them up a little bit.* Some of them didn't seem at all bothered or worried. Kiba was grinning and looked eager to scrap. Sasuke just smirked, probably thinking no one here was good enough to touch him. Naruto didn't change at all; he had the usual confident look about him. *All right demon let's test you.* "Naruto and Kiba please come forward." The two boys did so and took positions across from one another on the mat. "Bow to one another." The boys gave each other respectful bows. "Assume a fighting stance."

Kiba took up a normal taijutsu stance. Naruto put one foot a bit in front and the other a little behind and out to the side. One hand he held out in front of his face and the other behind his head near his ear.

Kiba sent him a look. "What's with the weird stance?"

"It's the starting position for crane style." He replied simply.

"All right, begin!"

Eager Kiba ran straight in trying to launch a strong if slightly clumsy attack. Naruto took a quick sidestep reached out and punched the back of his head. Kiba stumbled forward and fell dace down on the mat unconscious. The match was ended in less than ten seconds.

"Very well done Naruto! Really impressive!" Mizuki gave the boy a big encouraging smile. Naruto rubbed the back of his head and returned the smile. He liked Mizuki-sensei.

---

The girls were standing in a group a bit separate from the boys. They all watched as Naruto walked triumphantly off the mat.

Ino sighed. "He is sooo amazing, I sooo love him."

"No you don't Ino." The girl next to her said.

She instantly turned and glared at the girl. "What did you say Hinata-chan?"

Hinata calmly faced the irate blonde. "I said you don't love him." She felt strangely comfortable and did not stutter or stumble over her words. "You don't even really know him. To you he's just some ideal."

The other girls all quieted down and listened to the two of them. "Oh so I suppose you know him better?" Ino demanded.

"I've known Naruto-kun my whole life." She said simply. "And I can't remember a time when I didn't love him."

Ino sneered. "Too bad you two are just friends."

Hinata's eyes went to the floor. "Maybe that'll change one day."

Sensing an advantage she pushed it. "Yeah right! You are sooo not his type. I mean seriously do you think he'll end up with a quiet little mouse like you?"

Hinata's eyes came back up and she sent Ino a hard look she had never suspected the quiet girl even capable of. "I'm not a mouse! I'm a kunoichi and heir to one of the strongest clans in Konoha. And even if I am a little shy Ino *never* think that means I'm scared."

"Oh yeah? You really think you'll end up with him?"

"I don't know." She said honestly. "I don't know if I'll ever be strong enough to *deserve* someone like Naruto-kun. But I've decided that I want to be someone who would be worthy of his love. I've started working hard to become such a person and I'll continue to work towards that goal. Because to me Naruto-kun is worth that sacrifice; he is the one I love and the one who gives me courage."

"Well I'm going to get stronger too! And there's no way I'll lose Naruto-kun to you!"

Hinata shook her head "This isn't a competition."

"Hah! That just shows what you know when it comes to getting the boy you want it's *always* a competition and I intend to win."

Hinata frowned at her. "Is that all Naruto-kun is to you? The prize in a contest? Are you really that shallow?"

"WHAT?!" She began shaking her fist. "What did you just call me you little mouse?!"

"Is there a problem?" Mizuki asked.

"Mizuki-sensei I want to fight her right NOW!"

Mizuki looked at her in surprise. Usually it was the boys who developed grudges and demanded to settle them in a spar. He had planned to finish with the boys first but if Ino was this adamant it would be better to get this out of the way. "Do you have an objection Hinata?"

She shook her head. "No Mizuki-sensei."

He shrugged. "Very well both of you come forward and take your positions." Hinata took a step and halted. She thought for a moment and came to a decision. She unzipped her beige jacket and left it on the floor.

---

The boys were all watching as Ino and Hinata took their positions on the mat. This was the very first time any of them had seen her without a jacket. Even Naruto had not seen her without that jacket since she started wearing it about half a year ago.

"Hey!" Kiba shouted. "Hinata's got ta tas!" Almost immediately Kiba was grabbed around the collar and was yanked forward until he was nose to nose with a very angry Naruto.

" *What* did you just say dog boy?" Naruto growled.

Kiba gulped and felt the urge to whimper and turn up his belly.  
"Nothing."

Naruto let him loose and turned back to the girls. *Wow! Hinata -chan has ta tas*

---

Having bowed to one another Ino smiled. "Naruto's watching us."

"I know."

"Assume a fighting stance." Mizuki commanded.

Ino snapped into a standard Goken stance.

" **Byakugan** " activating her blood line the veins near her eyes popped up giving her a suddenly fearsome look. She dropped into a jyuken fighting stance.

Ino suddenly looked to Mizuki. "Hey! Is that allowed?"

"Is there a problem Ino? I told all of you to fight to the best of your ability and gentle fist is the fighting style of the Hyuga."

"But I didn't think she could actually use it." Ino felt just a little worried she'd heard of gentle fist and it was one of Konoha's strongest fighting styles.

Mizuki frowned at her. "Surprises and false assumptions are a part of ninja life. Consider this a valuable lesson for the future."

"Maybe you should twist your ankle." Hinata said sweetly. Ino glared at the girl.

"Woo hoo! Kick her ass Hinata-chan!" Naruto shouted.

Hinata smiled happily. *Watch me Naruto-kun.*

"All right," Mizuki spoke. "Begin!"

---

"She did it on purpose!" Ino got out as she pressed the bloodied cloth to her nose.

Hinata bowed. "I apologize Ino, I did not intend to break your nose." Ino glared at her clearly not believing it.

Mizuki shook his head. "Hinata you have nothing to apologize for. Bloodshed is inevitable when there is conflict." He looked at all the boys and girls. "Take a good look and get used to the sight. If you become ninja you will see it often. Ino go to the medic nin's office you are dismissed from the remainder of this session." Mizuki got back to the spars.

About twenty minutes later another Chunin instructor arrived and spoke quietly to Mizuki. Mizuki listened and then called out. "Naruto! The academy administrator wishes to speak with you. Please go with Larme."

Naruto nodded. "Yes Mizuki-sensei."

---

He followed the Chunin instructor out of the dojo and down one of the halls. Naruto quickly noticed something. "I beg pardon, Larme-sensei but isn't the administration office the other way?"

Larme shot Naruto a hard look. "The administrator wished to speak with you somewhere else."

"Why?" Naruto asked curiously.

"I don't know, I'm simply following orders now come along and don't ask questions" Naruto didn't appreciate the tone but nevertheless followed. They went up to the third floor where the fourth year students were being taught. As they went down the hall Naruto noted all the classrooms seemed to be empty. The senior students were all outside doing their physical training.

Larme came to a stop and so did Naruto. The Chunin pointed to room 315. "The administrator is in there waiting for you." Naruto remained exactly where he was. "Well what are you waiting for?"

Naruto had a hand on his belt. With one finger he pressed a button there activating his radio communicator. The microphone was in the collar of his body suit so anything he said would go out so long as the communicator was in the send position. "Pardon me but just why are we here on the third floor standing in front of room 315 again?" He asked casually.

Larme frowned at him. "I've already told you the administrator wishes to speak with you."

"Yes, but you haven't said why."

"You are being insolent! Do not keep the administrator waiting!"

"Actually would you mind asking him to come out and talk to me in the hall?"

"Don't be ridiculous! Now get in that room right now or you will be in a great deal of trouble!"

Naruto looked at the man's eyes. He saw fear and a mounting panic there. He saw a bead of sweat run down the side of his face. His eyes twitched nervously toward the door.

"You're lying." Naruto said quietly. In an instant he was dodging and pulling his sword out as Larme threw a pair of kunai at him and cried out. The door to the room opened and four men came out all of them holding knives.

Larme launched himself forward with a kunai in each hand. Naruto was on his feet and began the dance of the camellia. He took advantage of his height; he slid forward underneath his opponent's kunai strike. He drove his sword up and in with all his might aiming for the zipper that was in his Chunin vest. The sword struck and with savage might he drove the blade all the way through.

Larme cried out as he was skewered. Naruto yanked his sword back out again and took a couple steps back as the Chunin pitched forward dead or soon to be dead. His blood was spreading away from him. The four men who had come storming out of the room all came to a sudden halt at the sight they were confronted by. Their Chunin ally lying still on the floor in a pool of his own blood. Meanwhile their intended target was standing there with a bloodied sword eying them with a frightening calm.

"Is something wrong?" He asked pleasantly. "It's a little late for second thoughts." The men all looked at each other clearly frightened and unsure of what they should do. "Well if you really want we can just stand here and wait another minute and a half for my mom to arrive." As he'd known it would that settled them. They rushed at him with a shout waving their knives about. He waited for



them like a wolf waiting for some rabbits. It took four sword strokes and two steps to deal with them.

"It's over mom." He switched the communicator to receive.

"Naruto are you all right?!" His mother's panic stricken voice came over the link.

"I'm fine mom." He assured her.

"Are you still near room 315?"

"Yes mom."

"Stay there! I'll be with you in just a minute."

"O.k. mom." He switched off the radio. Now he could try and slow down his heart beat. He looked down at the bodies of the five men he had slaughtered. As he took out a rag and started leaning his sword he wondered why they hated him so much.

# Itachi

"Naruto!" Kushina turned the corner of the hall and saw him.

He looked back at her and spoke in an eerily calm voice. "Hi mom." Then he turned back around. He was looking at his handiwork. Five men were scattered along the floor in front of him. Their blood still flowing out and growing into a larger and larger pool.

She ran up to her son and took him in a fierce embrace. "Are you all right? Are you hurt?"

He slowly shook his head. "I'm fine mom not a scratch on me." When she let go of him he stood where he was and continued to look at the bloody scene.

She understood. Carefully taking his face in her hands she turned him around so his back was to the men. "Naruto, you did what you had to, what I have trained you to; if you had not done what you did these men would have gladly killed you. You have nothing to feel ashamed of or guilty about." She spoke to him gently.

He nodded. "I know that mom, I do. And when I was doing it, I was fine. It was just like training. I didn't see people I just saw targets and I hit the targets. But now..." he gulped and looked down ashamed.

"I understand Naruto-kun. To be shinobi is a hard thing, and to be forced to be one so young is even harder. In many ways son I wish you could have a different life. But for you Naruto-kun there is no choice, you must walk the path of the shinobi. What did you say your sensei's very first lesson was?"

He looked up again. She was not surprised to see some tears there. "Iruka-sensei said that the path of the shinobi was the path of death and glory. That we must always be ready to kill or die to protect our village. That is what it means to be shinobi." He sighed. "It's the

same thing that you and niisan have told me. I understand it, it's just..."

"The reality is never how you imagine it to be." She said simply. She gently wiped his tears away and smiled at him proudly. "Taking a life should *never* be done without cause. When we kill we do so in self defense or in the service of our village that is what separates us from common murderers or bandits. So long as when you act it is under one of those two circumstances do not doubt that your actions are just."

"Does it get easier?" He asked.

She nodded. "It does. In time you will learn to simply kill and not feel."

He shuddered a bit. "That sounds horrible."

She slowly nodded. "In a way it is, but Naruto-kun do you want to feel this every time you are forced to kill? Could you bear it? Kakashi and I have both killed many in our times and I think we are both good people with good hearts. But if we could not turn our heart off when we needed to we would go mad."

He looked at her unhappily. "You turn your hearts off?"

Kushina nodded. "We learn not to feel at those times. It is the only way to do it and stay sane."

"Mom it sounds kind of inhuman."

"It is son, but if you are a shinobi you cannot always afford to be human." She hugged him again and kissed him. "Do not misunderstand me! I do not mean to deaden your heart all the time, for that is just as bad as feeling too much. Be human; love, laugh, and even cry when your heart tells you to. But learn to be only shinobi when the time calls for it."

Naruto looked at her and slowly nodded. "I think I understand."

"Good." She took a hold of his arm and led him away and down another hall out of sight of what had happened. She took on a fierce look. "Let's go find your *sensei* who was supposed to be watching out for you."

---

His mother had been absolutely livid that her son had been attacked at the academy by an instructor. She had demanded that Mizuki be discharged for incompetence for allowing her son to go to an assassination attempt. But Naruto had defended his sensei, pointing out that all Mizuki had done was agree to a reasonable request from a fellow instructor. Kushina had then demanded she be allowed to remain in the class to watch over him. The Hokage explained that he could not allow such an extreme disruption to effect an entire class. So ultimately Kushina was faced with the choice of either allowing Naruto to remain in the academy under the current circumstances. Or of allowing him to take the graduation exam and beginning his shinobi career immediately. Kushina was not interested in this second option. Not only because she wanted him to continue to build more friendships but because she wanted to delay his becoming a ninja as long as possible. As dangerous as life in Konoha was for him she knew the danger would only increase once he began going on missions to foreign countries. She wanted him as strong and ready as possible before that day came. So in the end Naruto remained in class. The Hokage did agree to keep an ANBU squad on duty near the academy whenever he was there.

Kushina was not the only parent upset by the attack. Most of the other parents were also irate and, not surprisingly, blamed Naruto for being the cause. Most of the parents petitioned the Hokage to have Naruto removed from the class. The Hokage refused to punish him for being attacked while on the academy grounds. The parents then demanded that their children be placed in a different class. This demand was also refused as there were no other first year classes available. The Hokage did agree that the students could be pulled

out and allowed to repeat the opening course the following fall. A couple parents did this but the others declined as it would mean wasting a full year of their children's education and ninja careers.

For the students the fact that Naruto had actually *killed* a Chunin settled his standing in their eyes. He was, as Kiba liked to say, the pack leader. The only ones unwilling to acknowledge this fact were Sasuke and Sakura. As the semester continued the pecking order became clear and was best symbolized by the weekly sparring matches. Naruto never lost. Sasuke never lost, except to Naruto. Hinata was clearly the most powerful kunoichi and her swift and crippling jyuken strikes completely overwhelmed all the girls and nearly all the boys as well. She never defeated Naruto but she very nearly managed to beat Sasuke once. The top three slots in the class were cemented.

As for his social skills the girls, with the glaring exception of Sakura, were still infatuated with him. Ino was even more eager to be with him than before (though she never again offered to train with him.) She tried finding ways to spend time with him outside of class but Naruto declined. Hinata continued to train with him as much as she could and still worked on improving her jyuken. She remained the one at his side. Naruto made two additional male friends. Kiba liked him because he recognized him as 'pack leader' and admired his strength and leadership. Chouji was also drawn in mostly thanks to Shikamaru. He was invited to and attended Kiba's birthday party. This he found quite fun as he got to play with all the Inuzuka dogs. As the fall semester drew to its close he was doing well. But as he was always aware not everyone loved him.

---

"Hello little brother." A casual voice greeted him.

"Niisan!" Sasuke smiled. "What are you doing here?"

"My duties are done for the day and so I decided to stop by the academy."

"Great! We can go train together." As he spoke his classmates continued to exit the academy. One particular student in a rather eye catching cloak drew his attention. As was his habit he sent the student a hard look. Seeing this the particular student returned the look with a smile and a wave of his hand.

Itachi did not miss the interaction. He also had no trouble guessing the student's identity given his appearance. "Is that Namikaze Naruto?"

"Yeah." Sasuke's voice dripped venom.

Itachi lifted an eyebrow. "You do not care for him?"

"He's a pretender who is always showing off to get attention."

"Really? Hatake Kakashi speaks of him often and is lavish in his praise."

That brought a scowl to Sasuke's face. " *Everyone* says that! Iruka, Mizuki, and everyone in the class! He's not *that* good!" Sasuke spoke with a rare vehemence.

Itachi looked down at him. "He seems to bring out a rare passion in you little brother. Tell me is it true he has mastered both shadow clones and summoning?"

"Yes." Sasuke said flatly. He didn't like remembering how the little pretender had shown him up on the very first day of class. "Can we stop talking about him now?"

"Wait here a moment."

"Niisan where are you going?"

"I think I would like to meet him." Itachi replied. Sasuke could only stand there and watch as his revered older brother went over and talked to the little pretend Hokage.

---

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"Pardon me." A polite voice called.

The four of them had just been leaving the academy grounds. Kushina brought them to a halt. The ninja approaching was vaguely familiar. "You're Uchiha Itachi." Kushina said carefully. She did not have a good opinion of the Uchihis. Naruto seemed to have developed a strong dislike for Sasuke, though he refused to share any details with her. And she had never forgiven Fugaku for being the one leading the baying for Naruto's blood. "I met you once at the Tower."

"I remember." He offered her a slight bow. "But then who could forget meeting the famed Namikaze Kushina?" The two of them eyed one another warily and with a mutual respect. They had much in common. They were both powerful shinobi who took pride in their uncommon skill. They also shared the basic ANBU philosophy of doing whatever it took to get the job done. But there was one core difference between them. Itachi sought out personal excellence with a calm detachment. He deliberately attempted to deaden or otherwise ignore his emotions. To Itachi feelings were detriments, they were obstacles to be overcome so that one could learn what one was truly capable of.

Kushina was in that respect his opposite. She used her brain to set her strategy and figure out the best way to achieve it. But it was always her heart that guided her steps. Everything she had done, everything she had endured had been for the sake of love; her love for her husband and later her son. To Kushina her emotions were her reason for being and what gave her life meaning.

Perhaps sensing what they had in common and what they did not, they stood there eying each other like a pair of lions in a cage.

"And how can I help you Itachi?" Kushina asked cautiously.

"Actually," he lowered his gaze. "I wanted to meet your son. This is Naruto?"

Itachi's interest in her son gave her a small chill. She stood directly behind him and placed a hand on each shoulder. "He is, Naruto this is Uchiha Itachi. He is Sasuke's older brother, the heir to the Uchiha clan, and an ANBU captain."

Naruto nodded to him respectfully. "I am pleased to meet you Itachi-san."

"I am also quite pleased to meet you Naruto." He tilted his head. "May I call you Naruto-kun?"

Naruto shrugged. "If you like. Does that mean I can call you Itachi-kun?"

He gave a single nod. "You may. Tell me, might I take a closer look at you?"

That was a very odd request but Naruto nodded. "All right."

Itachi went down to one knee and put his face on Naruto's level and about two feet away. He shut his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again his pupils were both red.

"The sharingan." Naruto said.

"You've seen it before." Itachi sounded a little surprised. "Where?"

"Kakashi niisan showed me his."

Itachi nodded. "Yes that would make sense."

"Why are you looking at me with your sharingan? I'm not performing a jutsu or anything." Naruto felt just a little bit like squirming.

"Whenever I use my sharingan I always feel like I can see more clearly. I am curious to truly see you."

"What do you see?" Naruto asked a bit interested.



Itachi tilted his head a bit. "A mystery." He paused a bit. "Sasuke does not like you."

Naruto frowned. "I don't like him either. I think he's an arrogant jerk."

"Naruto!" Kushina scolded.

"That is quite all right. I find his blunt truthfulness refreshing." Itachi sent him a sliver thin smile. "Too many people only speak the truth when it is convenient. It speaks well of you that you can speak it even when it is not so." *Though you will need to learn when to speak and when to say nothing at all.* "Tell me something Naruto-kun. Do you know why so many people in this village hate you?"

Both he and Kushina stiffened a bit. "Why are you asking him *that*?" Kushina asked frostily.

"I have always been curious why the son of Konoha's greatest hero should be so despised by so many. I have always found that fact to be an enigma. I suspect that there *is* a reason. I have asked my father and others but no one would give me any information."

"I don't know why people hate me. It has never made any sense to me. I've just kind of come to accept it." Naruto said.

Itachi lifted his gaze a bit to look at Kushina. "And you Kushina do you know why your son is hated by those his father saved?"

Kushina glared at him and tightened her grip on her son's shoulders just a bit. Did Itachi know? How old would he have been on that night? Eight? Nine? Would Fugaku have told him the truth before the Sandaime passed his law? She couldn't very well ask him directly, and she damn well wasn't going to ask Fugaku. *What sort of game are you playing?* "I'm very sorry but I'm afraid I don't know either."

Itachi looked at her intently. "You are lying."

Naruto looked at her. "Mom?"

*Damn you!* "Itachi are you actually calling me, Namikaze Kushina, clan head of the Namikaze a liar?" A little bit of threat lay underneath the words.

"Yes." He said calmly. He looked to Naruto again. "As you can see Naruto-kun telling inconvenient truths is indeed uncommon."

"If you think I will remain here and be insulted by you Itachi you are sadly mistaken. We have wasted enough time. Let's go." She quickly got them moving while keeping her hold on her son.

"Good bye Naruto-kun, I am pleased to have met you." Naruto sent him back a confused look but said nothing.

---

Naruto waited until they had returned home and he and his mother were alone. "Mom?" He spoke in a small voice.

"Yes dear?"

He took a deep breath. "Why do people hate me?"

She looked at her son and tried not to show the panic she felt. "Dear you heard me tell Itachi I didn't know."

"Mom, I saw your eyes, you were lying." He paused. "And I can see you're lying now."

*I taught him too damn well.* She felt a certain melancholy pride that her son was not someone who could be easily fooled. *Well by adults, he still needs to work on reading eight year old girls.* She looked into her son's eyes. She could see his confusion and panic. *He's not ready yet.* She took a deep breath. "Son have I ever done anything to put you in danger or hurt you?"

He looked shocked. "No! Of course not!"

She knelt down before him and put her hands gently about his face. "And you know that I love you don't you?"

"Yes! Mom of course I know that!"

She nodded. "Son do you trust that whatever I do I do to try and protect you? That I always act in what I think is your best interest?"

He nodded vigorously. "Yes!"

"Then I am going to ask you to trust me now. Please don't ask me anymore about this. When the time comes I will explain everything, I promise."

Why was she so nervous? That was not something he'd seen in her face often. She'd made a promise to him though, and he knew he could trust that. "All right mom, I'll trust you to tell me when you think the time is right."

"Thank you dear!" She pulled him into a hug and gave him a big kiss on his cheek. Obviously relieved.

Naruto trusted his mother absolutely. But she'd taught him to look underneath the underneath. He couldn't help but wonder *why* she'd been so relieved at not telling him. What could be *that* bad?

---

They had just about reached their home in the middle of the Uchiha compound when Itachi finally broke the silence. "You've been very quiet Sasuke. Normally you'd be pleading with me to train with you."

"It never does any good so why bother?" Sasuke said bitterly.

Itachi looked him over. "Does it bother you that I spoke to Naruto?"

"No."

Itachi sighed. "If you truly intend to be a ninja Sasuke you will have be far better at deception."

"Maybe you can give me some lessons on that after you get done hanging out with that pretender." Sasuke hurried inside not really wanting anything more to do with his niisan at the moment.

Itachi watched him hurry inside. "Interesting." He said softly.

## Survival exercises

At the end of the semester they received their grades. And as was traditional along with the grades they received their class rankings.

"I am so proud of you Naruto-kun!" Kushina grabbed her son and began planting kisses all over his face.

"Mom stop!" Naruto tried to sound indignant but she couldn't miss that very happy smile.

"My son, top in his class I am very, very proud of you. I'll tell you what, let's celebrate! Is there anything special you'd like to celebrate your achievement?" She saw his face light up and his mouth open. "Not a katana, ask for something else."

"But why can't I have a katana?" He whined.

"Because you're not ready for one." Kushina said plainly.

"When will I be ready?"

"When I say you are."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "Stingy!"

She shook her head. "You're not getting a katana son, pick something else."

"Well can I have some of your special ramen?"

She hugged him and gave him three or four more kisses. "Now that you can have. I'll go ahead and make you all the special ramen you can eat!"

---

Sasuke stood before his father as he looked at his son's academic report.

"History: second. Codes: second. Math: second. Taijutsu: second. Weapons: second. Endurance: **third** ." Sasuke flinched at the very slight inflection his father added to that one word. "Over all standing: second." Fugaku looked down at his young son. "You disappoint me." Fugaku dropped the paper and walked away from him. Sasuke picked it up off the floor and slowly tore it up.

---

Hinata stood stock still in front of her father. He was sitting behind his desk and carefully reviewing her report. Despite an overwhelming urge to press her fingers together she stood there with hands firmly to her side. Finally he looked up from the paper and at her. She prepared herself for another tongue lashing. "You were third." He said in a neutral tone.

"Yes father." She said in a small voice. She kept her face up. A Hyuga was not supposed to ever look away from the person addressing them. She waited in dread for what was coming.

"Given that you trail only an Uchiha and a Namikaze, I find your performance acceptable."

"You do?" She sounded relieved.

That immediately brought out a frown on her father's face. "Do not misunderstand me daughter." He said in a frosty tone. "You should be first in all things." He paused. "However, to trail members of the other two elite clans of this village is understandable." His eyes considered her, weighed her, and judged her. "You have improved Hinata, *perhaps* you will make a worthy clan head one day." The tone was no warmer but compared to what she was used to his words were welcome.

"Arigato father."

"You have been training recently with Naruto."

"Yes father."

"I wish you to spend more time training with him and following his regimen. I have spoken to Kushina-san and she welcomes your increased participation."

For the first time she could remember she wore a smile while in an audience with her father.

---

The next morning Sasuke was on the asphalt outside the academy waiting patiently. He watched as Kushina and Kurenai delivered the pretender and his pet Hyuga. He snorted in contempt. *He* didn't need any help to get to and from the academy each day. Yet those two were always treated with kid gloves. He watched as Kushina and Kurenai departed and as the pretender and his little girlfriend started toward the academy hand in hand. He walked out to meet them coming to a stop directly in their path. Naruto and Hinata halted. Naruto looked at him with his usual air of confidence.

"Do you want something Sasuke?" Naruto said in that too chipper tone he *a/ways* used. To Sasuke it sounded more irritating than nails on a chalkboard. He clenched his fists.

"Fight me." As if by magic as soon those words were spoken all the kids in the courtyard began to gather around them.

Naruto just smiled. "Say what?"

"You heard me pretender. I want you to fight me right here and now."

Naruto's smile slowly grew. He let go of Hinata's hand and signaled her to step away. She looked at him a bit worried but did so and joined the circle of kids who were eagerly anticipating a fight. "Can't you wait until Friday? I'd be happy to kick your ass then."

"No more damn spars! I want a real fight! Come at me with everything you have and I'll show what an Uchiha can really do!"

Naruto's smile slipped and thinned and took on a little bit of a feral look to it. "If I did that Sasuke I'd kill you in about thirty seconds." With that he calmly began to saunter past the furious Uchiha.

"Don't turn your back on me!" On sheer instinct Sasuke pulled out a kunai and launched himself at Naruto's back.

Naruto felt killer intent and acted on his own instinct. Swinging back around he caught Sasuke's wrist with the kunai in it. With a hard twist he snapped it and the kunai dropped from the hand. Sasuke's rash move gave his body momentum, all Naruto did was add to it by pulling him forward. He stuck one leg out and tripped him, sending the proud Sasuke spilling to the ground. Immediately he twisted about to get back to his feet. He froze at the sight and feel of Naruto's blade at his throat. He could also feel Naruto's killer intent. Naruto was standing over him. Looking down Sasuke was the only one with a clear view of Naruto's face. He bit down to keep from gasping; Naruto's eyes were red and slitted like some animal's. Given the angle of his face Sasuke was the only one who could see it.

"Don't ever attack me again Sasuke!" Naruto's tone was low and fierce and very, very serious. "I'm not like you, I don't have time for stupid little playground brawls. When *anyone* attacks me for *any* reason my sword comes out. And when it comes out it draws blood. If you ever attack me again Sasuke you had better really mean it, because I might not be able to hold back. And while I have your full attention let me explain something to you. I don't give a damn that you're an Uchiha. As for you proving what you're capable of I can tell you what that is; second best. As long as I'm here that's all you'll be Sasuke so get used to it." He finally put his sword up. As Sasuke watched his eyes again became blue. He was sure that no one else had noticed. Even Naruto didn't seem to have realized it. With a thought Naruto ran his left palm over his blade slicing it open. He quickly wiped off his own blood and holstered his sword. With that he



walked off towards the classroom. Sasuke lay there defeated and humiliated, with virtually the entire class to bear witness to it.

The entire class and a few more.

---

Itachi saw the little encounter and nodded his head in approval. His foolish little brother had initiated an encounter with a foe that had beaten him regularly. He had done so expecting to win merely because he had Uchiha blood. That was typical of the attitude of the entire clan. They had given up trying to achieve individual excellence and instead relied on the comforting thought that they were superior merely due to birth. Such arrogance was dangerous and led to the sort of disaster his little brother had just encountered.

Now Naruto was different. He came from a great clan and had excellent blood as well. Yet Naruto refused to be satisfied merely with his legacy. He pushed himself mercilessly to achieve power and gain greater skill. He was too passionate. Like his mother he had never come to understand that emotions only fostered weakness. Yet his drive to succeed was truly impressive. *You are very interesting Naruto-kun.*

---

Kushina smiled. For once her habit of performing protective surveillance had yielded something interesting. Sasuke was still a child trying to fight a playground fight. Naruto was becoming a ninja and fought like one whenever he was attacked regardless of the circumstances. He'd also had sufficient self control not to kill the pompous little Uchiha. Once he was inside she finally headed home well pleased.

---

"He is sooo cool!" Ino practically shouted and the other girls all agreed.

---

Hinata was by his side and looking at his left hand. "Naruto-kun, why did you hurt yourself?"

He gave her a comforting smile. "Oh, it's an Uzumaki clan tradition that once a sword is drawn in combat it cannot be holstered until it has drawn blood." He chuckled. "And as tempting as it was I didn't think it would be a good idea for me to cut that second best."

"But you've hurt yourself!" Hinata said worriedly.

He continued to smile. "Don't worry about it Hinata-chan. I always heal fast, by the time we get to class my wound should be closed up." And sure enough as they were sitting down a couple minutes later he showed her his left palm was no longer bleeding and almost completely healed.

Hinata was glad his hand was all right but she wondered about something. "Naruto-kun you shouldn't be able to heal that fast without using a medical jutsu."

Naruto just shrugged, not worried about it. "What can I tell you Hinata-chan, I've always healed fast."

Hinata considered that. "Naruto-kun, do you think you might have a blood line limit?"

He looked at her intrigued by the thought, but shook his head. "Nope, there are no blood line limits in either the Namikaze or Uzumaki clans."

Hinata nodded and let it go, at least for now.

---

Iruka looked out at the class as they took their seats. They was quite a bit more conversation going on that usual. He noticed that Sasuke was the last one to arrive. To his surprise a few of his students were pointing to him and seeming to make some jokes. Sasuke sat down and pointedly ignored the attention he was receiving.

"All right class settle down please. I have an important announcement to make before we begin." He waited a moment for the kids to finally quiet. "All right class I have permission slips that all of you will have to bring home and have signed."

"What are they for Iruka-sensei?" Sakura asked.

Iruka gave them all a smile. "This weekend you will be going on your first field trip. We will be conducting a two day survival exercise in the woods outside the village."

"We're going outside the walls?" Kiba said excitedly.

Iruka nodded. "Yes we will, though it will only be a short distance away."

"Sounds troublesome," Shikamaru lifted his head from his desk. "Can't we just do this at one of the village training grounds?"

Iruka frowned at his worst student. "No, each of you will be placed in a separate section of forest and expected to find water, food, and shelter for 48 hours. None of the regular training grounds are large enough for our needs. None of you need to be concerned. Though we will be outside the village walls it will be quite safe."

---

The man looked at the picture on his desk. The picture was about fifteen years old. It showed him standing beside his son. They had both been ninjas of the village hidden in the rock. The picture had been taken to celebrate his son's promotion to Chunin. He could still remember how proud he'd been of Hideki. The boy had always made him proud. Then two months later he'd died at the hands of the Yellow Flash. Now he was slowly becoming an old man with no son to carry on the family name. The Motosuwa clan would end with him. Well the Yellow Flash had died more than eight years ago. But the hatred and need for revenge hadn't. Nothing he could do could bring Hideki back. Nothing he could do would cause pain to

Namikaze Minato who was beyond all earthly retribution now. But his hatred demanded that someone suffer.

"How sure are you of this information?" He asked his assistant.

"Our agents in Konoha confirm it. It seems reliable."

The man behind the desk nodded. All this would cost him was money, and he had plenty of that. "I want a two man ANBU squad sent out."

The assistant shook his head. "I'm afraid ANBU are not permitted to perform foreign missions unless they are at least of A-rank. This has received a ranking of B. We can use..."

"Send Yuzuki and Grella, they'll do it. The mission is hereby upgraded to A-rank."

"But sir! We haven't had the funds cleared to pay for an A-rank!"

The older man frowned at his assistant's small mindedness. "I'll make up the difference myself."

His assistant stared at him. Typical bureaucrat he could never understand why anyone would want to go outside the rules. "Well sir if you're really willing to pay it I suppose we can assign them." The assistant paused a bit. "But sir if I may ask why bother? The target isn't even a ninja; he's just an academy student. Hiring ANBU to deal with him is a bit like hiring a master thief to pick up a wallet lying on the ground."

"I know he's a student. He also has the blood of a Hokage in his veins. Not to mention he is reputed to have mastered shadow clones and summoning."

"Sir that is a ridiculous rumor and likely to be nothing more than some child's wild imagination."

"He is reported to have killed a Chunin single handedly. Is that also imagination?"

"No sir, that was definitely confirmed, but perhaps he was lucky."

"Well he can have all the luck Kami is willing to share. Against those two he won't stand a chance. For that I'll pay any cost."

His assistant sighed. "I will do as you say sir, though I don't understand it."

"Ever have any children Fuji?"

"Uh, no sir."

"I won't bother trying to explain it then."

---

"Survival exercises." Kushina looked at the permission slip unhappily.

"Yeah mom! This will be my very first time going outside the village walls." He said excitedly.

"No."

"What?"

"I said no Naruto-kun you aren't going." Kushina said simply.

"But everyone else is going!"

She lifted an eyebrow. "Naruto-kun I don't care about everyone else. I only care about you and you are not going."

"But we're only going *ten miles* and it will only be for two days! Why can't I go?"

"Simple, because ten miles means ten minutes before I can reach you if anything happens. That's too long, too much can happen in that much time."

"But mom you know I can take care of myself."

"You can Naruto-kun, that doesn't mean we should court danger."

"Oh come on mom! I mean if it's safe enough for *Shikamaru* how can it be too dangerous for me?"

"Naruto-kun for you stepping outside this village means being in greater danger." She said flatly.

"So the very first time I ever go outside the village walls even a step will be on my first mission? Mom, you're always saying I need to be ready for anything. How does keeping me so close do that? Wouldn't it be better for me to get experience being outside the village *now* instead of later when I will a shinobi with a squad?"

She frowned at him. That made a distressing amount of sense. Looked at rationally of course he should see what it was like going outside the village sooner than his first mission. And it was just an academy field trip. *Maybe I am just too worried about him. I have to let him experience new things in order to grow.*

Seeing her hesitate Naruto gave her a big confident smile. "Come on mom I *promise* to be careful and to call you if there's anything wrong at all."

She sighed and slowly nodded. "All right Naruto-kun, I suppose it will be all right so long as you are careful." Taking a pen she signed her name to the paper.

---

Itachi waited patiently as the door to his father's study opened. Three very angry looking members of the police force exited. They each sent him an angry look but departed the house without a word.

Fugaku looked at his son and heir. "Please come into my study Itachi."

Itachi did so. His father shut and locked the door. "Sit down."

"I prefer to stand." Itachi answered calmly.

Fugaku frowned. "Very well." He sat down behind his desk. "Itachi do you know anything about the drowning of Shisui?"

"No." Itachi remained utterly calm.

*I can't read him at all. He might as well be a complete stranger.*

"Shisui left behind a suicide note but there is suspicion that his death was a murder."

"I am the suspect." Again there was no emotion at all.

Fugaku nodded once. "Despite our recent disagreements son I have no wish for you to risk execution for something that may not have been your fault."

Itachi eyed him intently. "You are not certain of my innocence. You believe I may indeed be his killer." It was not an accusation just a statement.

"I do not know what to believe. Your behavior recently has been erratic. Shisui had been assigned to follow you. Last night when he was killed you were the only clan member not attending the formal meeting. Thus you are the only clan member without an alibi for the time of Shisui's death."

Itachi frowned slightly. "And only an Uchiha could possibly manage to kill another Uchiha?" He shook his head. "That sort of circular logic is what is reducing this clan to idiocy."

Fugaku frowned. "It is statements like *that* which have made people wonder about you. You are the pride of the Uchiha clan and its most

powerful member. Why must you constantly insult and degrade the clan and the immense value of Uchiha blood?"

"Because you all insist that being an Uchiha is the end point rather than a starting point. We should each seek out our own path and seek to accomplish as much as possible. This self assurance we are mired in erodes individual initiative and drive."

Fugaku shook his head. "Uchiha blood is the best in the entire world, never mind Konoha. There is nothing wrong in being proud of the fact and acknowledging it." He sighed. "But that is not important now. What is important is the fact that you are under suspicion. I have used my influence to have the police to agree to a short delay in the proceedings while they gather more evidence. But you have no more than a few days." He brought his hands together before his face. "I think it would be best for you to leave the village."

Itachi stared at his father for a moment. "You wish me to become a missing nin?" His voice was dead and empty.

"For a few years only. After which I shall arrange a pardon with the Hokage." He leaned back in his chair. " *If* you will perform one service for me prior to leaving Konoha."

"Who do you wish me to kill?" Itachi did not mean that as a joke.

Fugaku did not take it as a joke. "Namikaze Naruto."

Itachi lifted one eyebrow. "You want me to kill the Namikaze clan heir? And you expect me to believe that once I do so you will be able to arrange a pardon for me?" Itachi allowed just the tiniest bit of mockery to lace his words.

"Once Naruto is dead *no one* will regret it."

"Except his mother." Itachi pointed out.



"Once Naruto is gone she won't last very long." Fugaku spoke with a grim certainty.

Itachi eyed his father with a hint of interest. "Indeed, you do realize you are speaking of exterminating one of Konoha's greatest clans?"

"I think destroying this clan would be a benefit to the entire village."

"I shall remember you said that." Itachi promised.

"Kushina is not your concern. Will you do as I ask?"

"Perhaps, but first I wish to know the reason you and so many others are so eager to spill his blood."

Fugaku frowned. "The reasons are irrelevant. It should be enough that I ask it of you and that doing so will be in your own best interest."

"In that case my answer is no."

"Itachi why should you care about the reasons behind this?"

"If I am to kill not only a clan heir but a promising ninja I wish to know the reasons for it."

Fugaku eyed his son with frustration. *He has more potential than anyone else of his generation. Why must he insist on being difficult even now?* "Very well, I will tell you the secret. In doing so I am breaking a law of the Sandaime's. The punishment for breaking this law is death. I trust you understand the seriousness of the matter?"

Itachi nodded, he found himself to now be quite curious. "I do."

"Very well, to put it simply Naruto is the Kyuubi."

Itachi did not show it but he was truly surprised. He had theorized quite a few reasons why Naruto might be hated but he had never

come up with that one. He stood there and listened quietly as his father explained fully.

"And so that is why Naruto is hated and why killing him is a service to this entire village. Once he and his bitch of a mother are dead and buried you will be welcomed back with open arms. Now then, will you do as I ask?"

Itachi frowned slightly. "I have never heard of any evidence of demonic possession in his behavior. He has a source of great power within him which he seems well capable of controlling. Would the village not be better off aiding him in mastering his power rather than trying to destroy him?"

His father stared at him. "I have to remind myself that while I and others of our clan were out fighting that monster you were safe here in the village. If you had ever seen the nine tail fox you would have no doubts about killing it while there is still time. Now will you do as I ask?"

Itachi considered it. "Perhaps."

His father shut his eyes and ground his teeth. "Even now, with the future of the village and your own life at stake you insist on being difficult!"

"I am not attempting to be difficult. The simple fact is I have not decided whether or not to kill him."

"All right son I know how useless it is to argue with you but keep this in mind; in a few days you will be arrested if you are still within this village. Once you are arrested I will wash my hands of you. Should you flee this village I will again wash my hands of you *unless* you do as I ask. Is that clear?"

"It is father." With that Itachi left his father's study.

---

"Hey Naruto! I hardly recognize you without your cloak on." Kiba greeted him. It was early Saturday morning and the class was gathering on the courtyard. As per instructions they had not brought any camping equipment or food with them and they each carried only one canteen of water. They were allowed to bring with them only weapons and the standard ninja equipment any shinobi would be expected to have with him at any time. Currently Naruto was dressed in the same black and red bodysuit he always wore beneath his cloak.

"I'll only wear that when I am in the village. I won't be wearing it when I'm on missions or leave the village."

"They wouldn't let me bring any snacks!" Chouji cried out. "I'm going to starve!"

"Chouji, it's impossible to starve in just two days." Shikamaru said.

"But what am I supposed to do when I get hungry? I have to eat or I'll pass out from hunger."

"Don't worry Chouji there are plenty of grub worms in the forest and if you cook them over an open fire they taste just like chicken!" Naruto said. As soon as he said it Chouji Put his hands over his mouth and tried to stop his dry heaves. Shikamaru smirked and Kiba laughed long and hard.

"Naruto-kun that was awful!" Hinata chided.

He gave her his puppy dog look and then turned to Chouji. "I'm sorry Chouji."

"It's o.k." he said weakly.

Naruto smiled at him. "It's actually beetles that taste like chicken." Chouji's hands went back to his mouth and Kiba howled. Hinata crossed her arms over her chest and gave Naruto a look that clearly said, 'what am I going to do with you?'

---

Under Iruka's and Mizuki's watch they left Konoha and made their way to a section of forest that had been set aside for the exercises. Each student was taken to a different section of forest and told to remain there until 8 a.m. Monday morning. Each student was left alone and was expected to manage on his own.

As soon as Iruka dropped him off he got to work. Creating twenty shadow clones he set out hacking down tree limbs to build a shelter, looking for a water source, and hunting. In short order he had a rough but efficient hut set up, a small spring found, and a campfire with a nice fat rabbit cooking over it. Finding the rabbit had been the easiest part. He seemed to have a natural gift for it. He didn't know about the other students but he was sure to have no trouble managing a couple of days. Having eaten he took a little time to just enjoy the rather unique experience of being on his own for once. He had never been on his own for any extended time. For once there was no one nearby who was watching out for him, no one was responsible for him. For the next, he checked his watch, forty six hours or so he was on his own. He smiled and looked up at the blue sky. He liked it.

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"Boo."

"Eek!" Hinata dropped the branches she'd been gathering and instinctively jumped around bringing her hand around for a palm strike.

He blocked her hand easily enough and gave Hinata one of his big smiles. "Gee Hinata-chan; I thought you'd be happy to see me."

"Naruto-kun! What are you doing here?"

He shrugged. "I was bored and I wanted to see you."

"But how did you find me?"

He smiled and rubbed the back of his head. "Oh, well I just searched the area until I spotted you. By the way I'm about four miles that way."

She stared at him. "Naruto-kun you can't be here!"

"Why not?"

"If Iruka or Mizuki-sensei find out you'll be in trouble!"

"Hinata-chan they're not going to check up on us. The whole point of this exercise is for us to survive on our own."

"But Naruto-kun if you help me that will be cheating."

He looked around. Hinata had put together a shelter, had a fire going and looked to have gathered a good number of roots and herbs. "I don't think you need any help Hinata-chan, I never thought you would." She smiled and felt pleasure from his simple praise. "I was just bored and wanted to hang out with you."

"Oh." Her smile grew and she began to blush just a little.

He shrugged. "If you want me to go Hinata-chan I guess I'll find Kiba or Shikamaru."

She reached out and took a hold of his hand. "No Naruto-kun, you are always welcome." He smiled and relaxed the way he always did around her.

---

He got back to his own camp a little more than an hour before sunset. He rebuilt the fire and found another rabbit for dinner. After another tasty meal he watched as the sun set over the forest. It had been one of the best days of his whole life. And as he stood there looking at the setting sun he felt the tiniest bit of a chakra signature behind him. Casually he put one hand in his belt by the switch for his radio communicator. He slowly turned around.

Seeing who was there he pressed the button down into the send position. "Hello Itachi-kun."

"Hello Naruto-kun." A calm voice answered.

# Perfect

Itachi was standing on a tree limb about twenty feet away. He was wearing his ANBU armor but no mask. He did not have a weapon out and was just looking down. Naruto casually put his hand on his sword but didn't draw it.

"So why is an ANBU captain here in the middle of an academy training exercise?"

"I am here because of you Naruto-kun."

"Yeah I kind of guessed that. So are you going to attack me or what?"

Itachi's eyes flickered to a spot behind Naruto. "Move." Itachi was gone from the limb instantly.

Naruto yanked out his sword and leapt to the right ready for an attack from any direction. As he did so, he sensed movement and chakra coming from behind him. Naruto glanced back to see a ninja he didn't recognize burst out of the forest. Moreover, as he looked Itachi appeared right behind and drove a kunai into the base of his skull. The new arrival let out a gurgle and pitched forward dead. Itachi came to a halt and stood there looking tranquil. Naruto landed and turned to face him with his sword ready. *Whoa! He took that ninja out like it was nothing!* "What's going on here? Whose side are you on?"

Itachi looked at him. "There is one more." And disappeared.

Almost immediately, another ninja burst out of the forest. Like the first one Naruto didn't recognize him and he wore no hitai-ite. "Grella!" The ninja screamed out. "You bastard!" He began tossing shuriken and Naruto was forced to move fast to avoid them. He leapt behind a large tree to gain some temporary cover.

*This guy is definitely Jonin so I'm not fooling around with him. "*

**Shadow Clone Technique."** Twenty Narutos appeared in a large puff of smoke. As a group, they rushed out to surround their opponent and come at him from all sides.

The enemy ninja used a jutsu of his own. **"Rock Garden**

**Technique."** All around him jagged slabs of rock shot up out of the ground. The clones were all struck and immediately puffed out of existence. The original was also struck and wound up being knocked to the ground. The ninja quickly ran through some more hand signs.

**"Domu Barrier Technique."** Before Naruto could even get back to his feet the earth around him leapt up to completely surround and trap him. "You're finished now." Yuzuki called out. "I can drain your chakra while you're trapped in there. Once I've sucked you dry I'll finish you off. Don't bother trying to break out it's..." Without warning, half of the earth made dome exploded.

Naruto stood there with a sword in his right hand and his left hand glowing with chakra. He grinned a bit and looked at his left hand.

*Thanks godmother so much more useful than stupid medical jutsus.*

"I don't know who you are and I don't really care. But let me show you my power." He rushed forward eager to end it.

*He really is the Yellow Flash's son. "Living Colossus Technique."*

His body transformed from flesh into solid rock. Naruto launched his attack just as the technique took effect. He aimed his sword's strike for the middle of the chest. The strike hit perfectly and as Naruto drove the sword home, the blade snapped in half. To his credit Naruto was able to improvise immediately. He dropped his broken sword curled his left hand into a fist and swung that. With his chakra enhancing the blow he could have certainly destroyed his enemy's rock body as easily as he has the rock dome. But fortunately for Yuzuki his jutsu did not slow his reaction time. He was just able to catch Naruto's fist in his own hand before it could reach him. Yuzuki held Naruto's fist firmly trapped in his rock hard grip. He looked at the eight year old who had killed his best friend and partner. "You really are the Yellow Flash's son aren't you?"



"Yes I am." Even in the situation, he was in Naruto answered proudly.

Yuzuki nodded once respectfully and then proceeded to crush the boy's hand. Naruto screamed out in pain as the blood began to flow down his left arm. "If you lived you'd be as powerful as he was. It's a good thing we were sent here." He yanked Naruto up by his now useless hand and let him dangle in front of him like a fish caught on a hook. "Just so you know you little bastard all the power in the world is worthless if you can't reach your target. Now, no more jutsus for you and I get a little payback for what you did to Grella." With that said, he whipped Naruto about like a sack of potatoes and threw him full force into a tree. Naruto hit with most of his side and felt and heard his ribs break with a sickening, 'snap.' He was crying out in pain as he dropped to the ground. Yuzuki casually walked up to him and kicked him in the belly hard enough to send him flying about ten feet.

---

Itachi watched and frowned as Naruto was being beaten to death. *It seems I overestimated you Naruto-kun. I guess you weren't as strong as I'd thought.*

---

She heard her son scream and it was like a kunai slicing into her heart. She damned herself for letting this happen. She damned herself for not being able to do anything but listen as her poor boy was being killed. She was more than halfway there but her fear told her there was no hope. Naruto wasn't fighting anymore he was just being beaten. That sick bastard Itachi was just playing with him and it couldn't last long. Not long enough for her to save him. Her son howled and she screamed out in pain as well. If he died, if she lost him because she had let him go on this stupid exercise she would find and kill Itachi and then she would kill herself. She couldn't bear, couldn't stand to live without her poor son.

---

Yuzuki held the boy up at arm's length and looked him over. His nose was smashed and his face covered in blood. His left arm was broken, left hand smashed, from the way he was struggling to breathe all his ribs were probably broken, and he thought the right leg was broken too. Every breath was an agony for the boy, yet he was still able to look up at him and speak.

"Who are you?"

"An enemy of your father's that is all you need know. You haven't suffered enough for what you did to Grella, but if I did this to you for a year it wouldn't be enough and I don't have all day." He put one hand around Naruto's throat. "Now before I end this I would like to hear the son of the Yellow Flash beg me for mercy."

"Beg?"

Yuzuki smiled. "That's right. Beg me to spare you. Beg like the pitiful dog that you are." He began to squeeze. "Better start begging before it's too late."

He knew he was about to die. He felt a great deal of fear, a lot of regret, and even some shame. However, as the hand began tightening around his throat, what he felt more than anything else was anger. Anger that his life was ending now, like this. Anger that he was being denied the chance to achieve his destiny. Anger at what he knew this would do to his mother and to Hinata-chan. *It can't end like this!! I can't just die here like this, for nothing! NO! NO! NO!!* And as his anger became white hot, he felt something deep inside him come to life.

Yuzuki watched as the boy's eyes turned from blue to red. Despite the situation, he hesitated for just a moment. "What are you?" And it was that momentary hesitation that killed him. For as he stood there he saw red chakra begin to flow around the boy and he felt an evil and malevolent power coming from it. "What the hell are you?" He squeezed his hand but the red chakra was now between it and the boy's neck.

Naruto looked at him with hatred and screamed his answer. "I'm a future **Hokage!** And until I become Hokage I will **never** die!" Acting on pure instinct, he reached out to grab his attacker and the red chakra bent to his will. A gigantic paw flowed out from around him and clutched around the ninja's chest lifting him roughly about twenty feet into the air. Holding up his own right hand, he brought his fingers together and made a fist. " **Die!**" The gigantic paw crushed Yuzuki like a bug between two stones. Yuzuki's body exploded into a shower of rock which reverted to flesh and became a shower of blood and meat. Seeing what he had just done, he smiled and was glad to have killed him. With the threat now removed though his anger bled away and the chakra did as well. When the red chakra left him, he collapsed to the ground broken and powerless. "Mom." He whispered, too beaten to do more than that.

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She'd heard him scream out that he would never die until he was Hokage. Heard him command that Itachi die and then silence, nothing at all. Then she'd heard him call out to her. She didn't know what had happened but she had hope that she just might make it in time. She was less than a mile away, less than one minute from him. "Hold on Naruto-kun, just a little bit longer." Though he couldn't hear her, she prayed he knew she was close.

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Naruto watched as Itachi approached him and wondered if he was still going to die today. He couldn't even move. "You going to finish the job?"

To his immense relief Itachi shook his head. "No Naruto-kun. You are truly extraordinary and to deny you the chance to develop your full power would be a tragic shame. I want to see just how powerful you can become."

"Glad to hear it." As Naruto watched, his mother suddenly appeared behind Itachi. Her katana was out and already swinging for his neck. "Mom no!"

"Die!" Kushina screamed.

He didn't seem to move. One instant he was facing Naruto and talking to him. The next he was looking at Kushina her right wrist caught by his hand. Her blade had been brought to a halt a bare inch from his exposed neck. "Please do not attack me Kushina. I did not harm your son."

Naruto stared not believing he had just seen someone block his mother's attack with nothing but his bare hand. "Mom it's true Itachi-kun didn't attack me. He killed one of the ninjas who did."

Kushina stared at Itachi, clearly just as amazed that he had stopped her. She still did not trust him but was willing to believe her son. "All right, I won't attack you." He released his hold on her and she swiftly moved to her son's side staying between him and Itachi. Her blade remained up and ready.

"I thank you." Itachi said politely.

"If Naruto says you helped him then I believe it." Kushina eyed him warily. "But I would still like to know what you were doing here in the first place."

"The explanation is simple. I was ordered by my father to assassinate your son."

"What?!" Kushina's killer intent spiked and her katana twitched in her hands.

Itachi held up a hand. "I chose to disobey the order and came here to deliver a warning to Naruto-kun." He looked to Naruto. "My warning is simple Naruto-kun. Never trust any member of the Uchiha clan, and that includes my brother." He looked to Kushina again. "You should also be aware that had I actually killed Naruto my father intended to arrange your death as well."

"What?!" Naruto cried out, far more upset at the thought of his mother's death than at his own.

"Fugaku is a dead man." Kushina said flatly. "Will you go with me to the Tower and testify to all this before the Hokage?"

Itachi shook his head. "No, for you see while I chose to protect your son I have all ready committed murder. I will be leaving Konoha to become a missing nin." A slight grin touched his lips. "I trust that you will not try to stop me."

Kushina shook her head. "After what you've done today, no."

Itachi looked back down to Naruto. "You have great power within you Naruto-kun. Work hard to develop it and reach your full potential for I intend to do the same. One day I intend to test myself against you and see which of us is the stronger." He gave a slight and formal bow. "Until that day Naruto-kun, good bye." With that, he disappeared.

With Itachi gone Kushina finally knelt beside her bloodied and broken boy. She quickly performed a basic medical jutsu to check his vitals. "Oh Naruto-kun, my baby! Everything is going to be all right! Mommy is here and I'll take care of you." She was relieved to find that despite the beating he had taken his heartbeat and breathing were both steady. Her son **would** live!

"Mom... I hurt." He said quietly.

She knew how proud and strong he could be and how much pain he had to be in to admit that. "It's all right dear! I have something to help!" She quickly opened one of the pouches on her belt and went through it. She finally found what she had been looking for. She removed the needle's cap and squirted out just a little of the creamy white drug. She then stuck into a shoulder and pushed down the needle's plunger. "Here my darling one, the morphine will take the pain away and help you sleep. I'm getting you to the hospital right now." She dipped her sword in a puddle of blood, then quickly wiped

it clean and holstered it. She then took her precious little boy into her arms.

"Thank you mom that helps." His voice was already sounding sleepy. "Mom, I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough."

"Don't worry about that! It's not important! You survived that's all that matters."

"It wasn't me mom..." His mind was beginning to drift. "The red chakra..." he fell into sleep. She cradled him close to her and moved as fast as she had come. She wasn't worried about what he'd said there would be time for him to tell her everything later.

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"Hinata!" Iruka's voice called out loudly as he landed nearby.

Hinata quickly got to her feet. "Yes Iruka-sensei?"

"Please gather all your things. Mizuki, I and some other instructors are gathering all your classmates. The exercises are over."

"But why Iruka-sensei?"

Her teacher looked at her with deep unhappiness. "I am afraid one of the students was attacked. We had a perimeter set up around the forest but it looks as though a pair of foreign ninja were able to penetrate it."

A terrible thought made her stomach turn to ice. "Iruka-sensei it wasn't Naruto-kun was it?"

He looked at her and sadly nodded. "I'm afraid it was." Hinata felt her entire world disappear. Iruka caught her as she fainted.

---

"Hello father." A calm voice spoke from the shadows.

Fugaku stared at his son as he stepped out into the light. "Itachi what happened? I've heard reports that Naruto was attacked but survived. He is in the hospital under ANBU protection. How did you fail?"

"I did not fail. Naruto was attacked by a pair of foreign ninjas. I did not attack him."

"You watched as a pair of foreign ninjas attacked him and you did nothing?!"

"Actually father I killed one of the two ninjas."

Fugaku looked at him as though he were insane. "You *helped* him?"

Itachi nodded calmly. "That is correct."

"Why? Why would you do such a thing?" Fugaku demanded.

"Because Naruto has a power inside of him that I want to see grow and develop. I want to see him become a truly powerful ninja so that I may one day test myself against him and learn what I am truly capable of." And saying that he took out his sword from his back and drove it into his father's chest. Fugaku gasped and choked out blood. "You are too determined to kill Naruto, so I am afraid I cannot leave you alive." Itachi stood there and watched the light leave his father's eyes, and felt nothing. A moment later, his mother entered the study and began screaming. Itachi appeared behind her and silenced her with a punch to the back of the skull. She fell to the floor unconscious, but very much alive. He then calmly walked out of his home. As he walked into the night a few people recognized him, he politely returned their greetings. He had considered killing them all as a service to the village. In his opinion, the entire clan had degenerated to the point of being a disease that would only sicken Konoha. He had thought of performing the service of curing Konoha of this disease prior to leaving. However, he had reconsidered. If so many of the villagers and shinobi wanted to harm Naruto then the entire village was already diseased and perhaps terminally so.

Besides, with the Uchiha clan intact Naruto would have a powerful enemy always right outside his door. That would give him excellent motivation. Thinking of motivation Itachi smiled.

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"Sasuke."

"Niisan!" Sasuke hurried up to his big brother. "Did you hear? Naruto got attacked by a couple of ninjas and is in the hospital right now."

Itachi looked at him consideringly. "Do you hope he survives?"

Sasuke looked shocked by the question. "Of course I do! Even if I don't like him I don't want him to die."

"Come with me Sasuke there are things I must tell you." In short order the two of them were in a dark alley not far from the Uchiha compound. "I am leaving the village tonight little brother. After tonight I will become a missing nin and the disgrace of the Uchiha clan." He said it as calmly as he did everything else.

"What?!" Sasuke looked at his revered big brother. "Why would you do that?"

"Because three days ago I murdered Shisui and less than an hour ago I murdered our father." He answered calmly. Seeing Sasuke was about to start screaming he planted a hand over his mouth. "I have no intention of harming you little brother. However, should you begin to scream I will. Do you understand?" Sasuke nodded and Itachi released his hand.

"Why?" he sobbed. "Why did you kill father?"

"To protect Naruto."

"What?!"



Itachi nodded. "Father ordered me to assassinate him. I refused the order and helped him to survive this night's attack. Not that he needed much help. He is already very powerful and will grow more so. Father was a fool and would have kept attempting to kill him. To safe guard Naruto's future it was necessary to end our father's life."

"You killed father to help Naruto?" Sasuke whispered.

"Indeed, but that is not all. Let me show you something." He shut his eyes and activated the power of the Mangekyo sharingan. Sasuke was drawn into a colorless world. He recognized it as the Uchiha compound.

"What is this?" Sasuke asked in fear and confusion.

"Watch." His brother spoke.

As Sasuke watched, he saw a familiar figure walk into the Uchiha compound. Why would Naruto come here? And as Sasuke watched, Naruto changed. It was like watching a snake shed its skin. He began to shake and be covered by visible chakra, and then he began to grow and change shape. In short, order Naruto had become a gigantic nine tail fox. "What is this?!" He watched as his friends and family all began to flee and as the fox began to level the Uchiha compound. "Brother stop this!"

"Watch closely." His brother intoned.

"Mother!!" Sasuke howled as his mother was snatched up into the fox's jaws and devoured. He stood there and watched as his home was flattened and as the people he loved were slaughtered by the beast. He was on his knees crying and begging for it to stop.

Itachi could have forced Sasuke to relive it for seventy-two hours. But Itachi's goal in this was to provide his foolish little brother with motivation not shatter his mind. He ended the effect and they were again in the alleyway. Sasuke crumpled to the ground weeping. For him it had seemed utterly real. "Naruto possesses the Kyuubi within

him that is why he is hated by so many. That is also why he is so powerful. That is the power I want to help him grow."

"You want *that*? " Sasuke said in horror, he remembered Naruto's red eyes.

"Yes, I want Naruto to achieve as much power as he can. And if in reaching his potential he should lay waste to this entire village and everyone it that would be small loss. Have no doubt Sasuke that what you saw *will* come to pass one day."

"If you really believe that then *why* ? Why would you help him and even kill father just to help him?"

"I need a powerful opponent to test my abilities against. Naruto is the only one in this entire village who I think might one day have the power to do that." Itachi managed a tiny smile. "And do you know why Sasuke? Because he knows how to *hate*. I saw him kill his opponent and felt his anger and his hatred, it was a wonder to behold. To gain real power you must have a deep and powerful hatred to drive you."

"Good! Because I hate you and I hate Naruto!" Itachi did finally see hate in his brother's eyes. "I'm going to kill both of you!"

Itachi nodded. "Remember that you must kill Naruto first, if you are not strong enough to defeat him you will have no chance to defeat me. And in order to gain that strength you will need the same power I posses. You too can gain the power of the Mangekyo sharingan, but there is a cost. You must kill your closest friend. It is the grief of such a loss that will allow your sharingan to reach the final state. But of course, before that day comes you must activate your sharingan. Now remember little brother, you must learn to hate and pursue power at all cost. Only in that way can you ever hope to defeat me or Naruto." With that he hit his brother and knocked him out. *Perfect. Naruto will never trust the Uchihis. Sasuke will hate Naruto and try to destroy him. They will be enemies and there is no possibility of either one ever trusting the other. Their hatred and rivalry will help*

*each gain greater power. Whichever one kills the other should make an excellent test of my abilities. I would put my money on Naruto. But at least I have given you your chance Sasuke. I've given you your motivation and a set goal. I have given you the chance to be a great ninja, after all what is an older brother for?*

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Naruto opened his eyes. He was lying in a grass field with many sweet smelling flowers. He didn't feel any pain. He got to his feet and looked around. A little ways in front of him was an old ruined fortress. It had been made of black stone and seemed to have mostly fallen in on itself. Being curious, he decided to explore. As he neared it he saw the arched gateway into the fort was blocked by a huge iron gate, a lot like the one in front of his home. In the middle of the gate, he saw a single seal. Approaching the gate slowly he tried to peer inside, but even though it was day out the inside of the fortress was utterly dark.

"Hello," he called out. "Is there anyone there?"

And he heard it. A low dry laughter that scared him and made his spine tingle. He was already backing away when the two large red eyes opened. He froze. He was terrified but couldn't make himself move. He wondered if this was what a rabbit felt when the wolf's eyes fell upon him. And then the teeth. Two rows of long sharp teeth seemed to grin down hungrily.

***FINALLY YOU HAVE COME! KNEEL BEFORE ME AND SHOW ME PROPER RESPECT!*** A voice like thunder cried out.

"Who are you?" He whispered.

Laughter thick with malice made his stomach turn. ***I AM THE GREAT AND POWERFUL KYUUBI!***

## Who you are

Sasuke took his usual seat. It was Monday morning and the start of another week of school. Everything was the same as always. Everything was completely different.

"Oh Sasuke-kun can I sit next to you?" An excited Sakura asked.

"Hn." He folded his hands in front of his face.

She took this as an affirmative and sat down beside her crush. "Isn't it terrible what happened Saturday? I mean I can hardly believe it! And I hear that one of the ninjas who attacked Naruto was *torn apart* ! Can you believe that?"

Despite himself he shut his eyes and shivered a bit. *Can I believe Naruto could tear someone apart? Oh yes, without a doubt.* "Hn." He was trying to ignore her and hoped she would get the hint he was not feeling talkative.

Sakura noticed Sasuke's depressed mood and tried to cheer him. "You know Sasuke-kun it really speaks well of your generous soul that you're so upset about Naruto!" He turned his head a bit to look at her. "I mean I had no idea you cared so much about him that his being in the hospital would depress you! You really are very thoughtful and kind."

He turned away from her without a word. *Typical airhead, I'm depressed because my father was killed by my psychotic brother and because I know one of my classmates is a monster.* In all fairness there was a reason Sakura didn't know about Sasuke's personal tragedy. The Uchiha clan had moved swiftly to cover up what had happened. The Uchihas were a rather secretive lot to begin with. After Itachi's murder and betrayal it had been decided not to make any of what had happened public, less the clan's reputation suffer. And since the Uchiha's had a huge influence with the police

force it was not hard to do. Sasuke had found it difficult but had agreed to not speak of it to anyone outside the clan.

"Did you send him any flowers?" Sakura asked with an annoyingly cheerful grin. "I sent him a few, just to be nice since he *is* in the hospital."

He looked at her again. "No Sakura," he said icily. "I didn't send him any flowers."

Sakura could feel the chill and numbly nodded and cast her eyes down. She didn't understand what she had said to get that sort of reaction.

Seeing that Sakura was going to leave him alone Sasuke looked around the classroom. There were Shikamaru, Chouji, and Kiba all sitting in the back row talking. Shikamaru was complaining that even though it would be troublesome he would go with the other two to visit Naruto after class. Across on the other side Ino was holding court and bragging to the other dimwit girls about how many flowers she had sent Naruto. Looking all about the room he was not surprised to see Hinata was missing. He was sure she was at the hospital, probably curled up at Naruto's feet.

He turned his face back to the front. He felt contempt for all of them. They were all gullible fools who had fallen for an act. None of them had the slightest idea that the boy they were so worried about would probably end up eating them one day. When his mother had recovered from her shock at what had happened he'd spoken to her about what Itachi had told him. To his horror she had confirmed that what big brother had said was the truth. Naruto was the Kyuubi. Then his mother had told him about the Sandaime's law. He couldn't even tell his classmates the sort of danger they were in without putting his neck, literally, on the chopping block. He sighed, in just one day his life had changed completely. On Saturday morning life had been good, if not perfect. By Saturday night his father had been murdered, his mother shattered, his idolized big brother had become a heartless killer, and Naruto was a monster that would destroy them

all one day. And one more thing had happened, his child hood had ended. Now he was an adult, and an adult with a terrible responsibility. He would have to be the savior of his clan and his village, as well as his father's avenger. He would have to be the one to save Konoha from the Kyuubi and then kill his older brother to avenge his father. That was an awful lot to put on an eight year old's shoulders. But he was his father's son and an Uchiha; he would bear up to it and fulfill his responsibilities.

His very first thought of course had been to alert the clan of the danger and of all of them acting together to deal with it. His mother had been horrified at the suggestion. She had quickly explained to him that all the adults in the village knew about the Kyuubi, it was a secret only to the younger generation. If the clan did as he suggested it would be an open declaration of war not just against Namikaze but against Hyuga as well. Many of the adults might hate Naruto, but few were ready to go as far as civil war to try and kill him. Hearing that the very next thought that had occurred to him was simply to do it himself the next time he saw him. He pictured himself as heroically slaying the monster and being hailed as a savior. It was a nice image, but the more he thought about it the more he realized it was impossible. After the beating in the courtyard he was honest enough with himself to admit he was no match for Naruto. (Though he'd be damned if he'd admit it to anyone else!)

He tried to look at the problem like an adult rather than as a frustrated kid. Iruka, Mizuki, Kushina, the Hyuga, the Sandaime, and the ANBU. The list of people Naruto had to defend him was depressingly long. Even more depressing was Kushina's near mythical reputation for dealing with people who threatened her boy. For the life of him he didn't understand why all these people would protect the Kyuubi, but they did. Thinking about the problem and the obstacles in his path led him to a very adult decision. *I can't do anything while he's in Konoha. He is just too well protected here. It'll have to be somewhere outside of Konoha and that means it'll have to be after I become a shinobi.* He sighed again. The thought of having to wait so long and having to live and work beside the Kyuubi

frightened him. But he saw no other way. *Everything I do for the next few years has to be aimed towards that day. I have to gain power and activate my sharingan. I should probably try and get some allies on my side too, that would make it easier.* When he thought about allies he had a disturbing realization. Nearly everyone he knew was on Naruto's side. That had never worried him before; he had his clan after all. But he would also need people who would watch his back and do as he told them. Defeating Naruto and saving the village would be incredibly hard; he was going to need help. He carefully looked at the girl sitting next to him. She was still looking down at the desk

He let out yet another small sigh. He was not eager to do what he had in mind. But if it would help him save the village one day he was ready to make *any* sacrifice. He forced a small grin onto his face. "Sakura-chan?" he said gently.

Her head snapped up immediately. *Did he just call me chan?* "Uhm, yes Sasuke-kun?"

He looked directly into her eyes and tried to convey a warmth he didn't feel. "I'm very sorry if I was rude to you. I guess what happened Saturday has me feeling kind of bad."

Seeing the look in his eyes and hearing the concern in his voice she immediately began to blush. *Oh Kami! He's finally being nice to me! I **knew** I'd win him over eventually!* "It's all right Sasuke-kun, I understand."

"Say Sakura-chan would you like to have lunch with me today?"

She began to giggle and Sasuke was immediately reminded of nails on a chalkboard. But the smile stayed in place. "Sasuke-kun I would love to have lunch with you!"

*It's for the village and the greater good.* "Great."

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Naruto heard familiar voices as he slowly felt himself coming awake.

"Shhhh, I think his eyes are opening. Naruto-kun honey are you awake?" A relieved and very comforting voice spoke to him.

"Yeah mom." He slowly opened his eyes. The lights were much too bright. He felt really sore, but at least he wasn't in pain any more.

"Oh honey I'm so glad!" She leaned down and kissed both his cheeks. "You've been asleep for two days. I've been so worried about you!"

"Well I haven't. I knew you were much too stubborn to be anything but all right." A chipper voice said.

Naruto had to focus his eyes a bit. "Is that you Kakashi-niisan?"

"Yo," he answered. "I've just been keeping your mom company."

"Naruto-kun!" Hinata leaned all the way over the edge of his hospital bed and fell onto the mattress beside him. She was desperate to put her arms around him and didn't care. She put her arms around his neck and pressed her face against his cheek. "Oh Naruto-kun I am so glad you're all right! I was so worried about you!"

She was hugging him with all her might and his body was sore.  
"Ow!"

She immediately let go and bolted up right. "I'm sorry Naruto-kun! Oh I didn't mean to hurt you!" She was trying to scramble away when he got a hold of her hand with his right.

"It's o.k. Hinata-chan! It's o.k., just be a little gentle that's all." With his hand he began tugging her back towards him.

She let him pull her back towards him. "Are you sure Naruto-kun?" She asked nervously.



"I'm sure Hinata-chan. I like it when you hug me, just be gentle." With his encouragement she carefully put her arms around his neck again and her face rested next to his. His right arm he put around her waist. He tried to put his other arm around her but it refused to lift, it felt like it was weighted down.

"Is this all right Naruto-kun?" She asked shyly. It felt just a little weird to be lying on top of him like this. But after the last two days she wanted contract with him. She wanted him to be in her arms.

He smiled at her fondly. "Yeah Hinata-chan that feels fine." She closed her eyes and sighed contentedly.

Kushina and Kakashi were both looking at the two eight year olds and smiling. They really were just too cute. "How are you feeling son?"

"I feel sore mom, but I'm not in pain. My left arm though, it feels heavy." He finally managed to lift his arm. His forearm was in a cast. His hand was a huge mass of bandages, the fingers were hidden. "Mom, if I've been here two days why am I still a mess? I normally heal really fast."

Kushina frowned. "I know son, but those wounds were always cuts or tears. You had a lot of broken bones and whatever it is in your chemistry that gives you fast healing doesn't seem to work as well on that. It may also be that your body just took so much damage at one time. You were in surgery for over six hours being treated. Most of your bones have been healed and will just need a little while to finish setting." She looked very unhappy. "I'm afraid your left hand though suffered a lot of damage."

"How bad is it?" Naruto looked at the wrappings at the end of his forearm.

"The medic nins say you might not regain full use of it again." She saw the panic in his eyes and motioned for him to be calm. "But I've

sent for your godmother. I don't know when she'll get here but when she does we'll see what she says."

Naruto slowly nodded. He knew his godmother was the world's greatest medic nin. He shut his eyes and put his arm back down. "I don't suppose it really matters anymore." He sounded defeated. Everyone looked at him in surprise.

"Honey, don't be depressed. I'm sure once Tsunade is here she'll be able to heal you."

"Yes Naruto-kun," Hinata said. "I'm sure everything will be fine now."

He looked at her and smiled a bit sadly. "Hinata-chan, would you mind waiting in the hall for a little bit while I talk to my mom alone?" He looked at Kakashi. "Would you mind too niisan?"

"Oh, well of course Naruto-kun." Hinata was a little disappointed she had just started getting comfortable. She quickly slid back off the hospital bed.

"All right Naruto, come on Hinata let's get something to eat." The two of them left the room.

Kushina looked at her son a bit curious. She had never seen him look so cheerless. "Honey, I know how depressing it can be stuck in a hospital but it's o.k. We'll have you home soon and once Tsunade gets here I'm sure you'll be just fine."

"No mom, I don't think I'm ever going to be fine again." He said with a depressing certainty. "I'm not really worried about my hand. I'm sure godmother will fix it. Even if she doesn't I'll manage one way or another."

"Well son if you feel that way why are you so depressed?"

"Because I know." He said sadly.

"Know what?"

He looked at her with eyes filled with pain. "I know why everyone hates me mom. I know what's inside me."

"Oh dear Kami," she whispered. "Itachi told you."

"No mom, the Kyuubi told me."

"What?! Son what do you mean the Kyuubi told you?!" Terrifying thoughts of what that might mean flashed through her mind.

"I had a nightmare mom. In it the Kyuubi spoke to me. He told me what really happened the night I was born. He told me it was his power that let me heal fast, that gave me so much chakra capacity, and that gave me the red chakra. Mom when I fought that ninja it was the red chakra that saved me. It was the Kyuubi's power that saved me."

"I see." She said quietly. "Well, I never thought I'd say this but I'm glad for the Kyuubi's power."

Mother and son looked at each other for a moment. Naruto sighed. "When were you going to tell me mom?"

"I don't know." She answered truthfully. "I was planning to tell you sometime before you became a Genin. To be honest son it wasn't a conversation I was eager to have."

"Mom, why did dad do this to me?"

She took a deep shuddering breath. All at once she was remembering *that* night again. The Kyuubi's sudden appearance, it's approach towards Konoha, her husband's desperate decision and her tearful agreement, her labor, her very first time holding him in her arms, her begging Minato not to take him, and finally darkness. "It was the only way son. A Bijū cannot be killed by a mortal and the Kyuubi's power was too great to be stopped. The only choice, the only possible way to save the village was to trap the Kyuubi in a vessel that could adopt and hold all its chakra. And the only vessel

that could do that was a new born child with an undeveloped chakra system. Stopping the Kyuubi required two things; a new born to act as the vessel and a human sacrifice to work the jutsu. He felt as the Hokage it was his duty to sacrifice himself to save the village. And as his son and heir he felt it was your duty to be the vessel. He did not feel he could justify asking another parent to make a sacrifice he was unwilling to. He felt it fell upon his clan to make the sacrifices necessary to save Konoha." She looked to her son and waited for his reaction. If he was bitter and angry he certainly had cause to be.

Naruto looked down. He took a deep breath. "I understand." He answered quietly.

"You do?"

Her son looked back up at her. He seemed weary but accepting. "Mom, I've said before that I would give anything even my life to protect Konoha." He gave her a sad smile. "I guess in a way I already have. I understand it. The Hokage's duty is to protect Konoha whatever the cost. I can't blame my father for fulfilling his duty. And being his son I can even understand why he chose me to bear this burden." He chuckled sourly. "Even if everyone does hate me for it."

"Son everyone does *not* hate you! Kakashi, the Sandaime, Tsunade, Jiraiya, Hiashi, and all those people on the street who bow or cheer for you know the truth and see you as a hero, as your father wished."

"I suppose so, but there are plenty of people who hate me an awful lot." Kushina could hardly disagree with that. "I guess it's time for me to find another goal."

"What do you mean?"

He looked at his mother in surprise. "I mean about me becoming Hokage. Now that I know that I can never be Hokage I'll need to find another goal for myself."

She looked at him in astonishment. "Son what makes you think you can't be Hokage?"

He frowned at her. "Mom how can I be Hokage when I'm a monster?" She sent a look of outrage and was at his side in an instant. "Ow!" He rubbed the top of his head with his right hand and looked at his mother in shock. "Mom you hit me!" Except when they were sparring she had never hit him.

"Don't *ever* say that again son! That's the sort of thing those fools who hate you say! Have you forgotten your promise so soon?! Do you remember your very first day at the academy son? What did I ask you to promise me?"

"To never forget who I am."

"And who are you?"

He looked at her confused. "Mom I'm Namikaze Naruto, your son and the son of Namikaze Minato."

"Yes you are." She sat down on the bed and took him into her arms and hugged him close. "You are my son and you are Minato's son and you are a good brave boy. Never ever think that you are anything else. Tell me son how did you feel when you killed those men at the academy?"

He swallowed at the memory. "I felt bad, I felt guilty."

"And do you really think you would feel that if you were really the Kyuubi?"

"But it was different the last time! When I used the red chakra I was *happy* that I killed."

"Were you also angry?"

"Yes very, very angry."

"And were you scared?" He simply nodded. "Naruto-kun it is perfectly normal and perfectly *human* to be happy at killing someone who was trying to kill you. That doesn't make you a demon."

"But mom the seal on my belly, my healing, the red chakra..."

"Are all a part of you son. Just as your nose, or your liver, or your little toe are all a part but not all of you. The Kyuubi is inside of you, that is true. But you are *not* the Kyuubi and you never will be no matter how many fools refuse to believe that. You have its power and perhaps even its knowledge but *you* Naruto will choose how to use it. You said the red chakra saved your life. I would definitely call that a good use of the demon's power. Naruto-kun we all possess the capacity for good or evil. We all choose the life's path we take. You are human and you have that same choice. What is special about you my son is the capacity you possess. You have great power within you, but that power can be used for either good or evil. The *choice* is yours." She looked into his eyes and spoke carefully. "Use the Kyuubi's power son." He looked at her in shock. "That power belongs to you as much as the strength of your muscles does. Take the power within you and use it to guard and protect this village. As its Hokage."

He put his one good arm around her and tried to hug her tight. "Thanks mom." He said in a voice that ached with relief.

## Two blondes visit

Saturday was bright and clear. It was a beautiful day if a little cold. Naruto looked down at the board and frowned. He reached over and turned over his king, signaling he was conceding.

Shikamaru looked at him in surprise. "What's the matter? You usually never concede."

Naruto shrugged. "What was the point? You would have beaten me in six moves."

"Five moves. Want to play again?"

Naruto shook his head. Though he knew it was stupid he began scratching the cast on his left arm. It didn't help with the itch but he felt almost compelled to do it anyway. "I really **hate** this thing!"

"Don't be so troublesome Naruto. You should be glad you survived at all. Shikamaru said. "No one else in our class would have had a chance."

"That's right," munch, munch, munch. "You're really lucky."

Naruto knew what they were saying was the simple truth but he wasn't in a mood to hear it. He glared at the casts on his arm and right leg. Then for added measure he sent another glare at the crutches propped up on the bench next to him. "I suppose that I am but I sure don't feel lucky right now."

Hinata was standing behind him. She leaned against his back and put her arms around him. Since the hospital when he'd told her he liked her hugs she'd taken every opportunity to put her arms around him. She had noticed that whenever she did that his mood would improve and he would seem to relax a little. "Naruto-kun I *know* why you're unhappy. You keep looking at the obstacle course and the

trail. I know you want to be working out, but please be just a little patient the casts come off tomorrow."

He turned his head a little so he could smile at her. "You know me way too well Hinata-chan." He let out a deep sigh. "But even after I get these stupid casts off I *still* won't be able to do a full work out. My mom says I have to *rehabilitate* slowly." His mouth twisted a bit when he spoke that word, as though it had a bad taste to it. "My mom says I won't be back to my regular pace for at least a *month!* " He looked at her with despair. "And I've already missed so much time not just training but in class too!"

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. "Naruto please stop being so troublesome. You only missed one week of class time and I'm sure we didn't cover anything important." He shrugged. "Well I don't think we did. I was asleep through most of it."

"Actually I brought Naruto-kun my notes on everything we covered in class so he hasn't really missed anything." Hinata said.

"You've been studying this whole time when you should have been doing nothing?" Shikamaru actually sounded disappointed. "Naruto I really am going to have to give you some lessons on how to slack off."

Naruto grinned a bit feeling his spirits rise just a little. "No thanks Shika, you do enough of that for both us." He looked about the rose garden. Even if he couldn't do anything he liked being outside. His friends had all come over in the late morning to keep him company for awhile. His mom had made them all cookies and snacks. Shika had brought a travel shogi set, Chouji had brought some extra chips, Kiba had brought Akamaru, and Hinata had brought the best thing of all to help him pass the time; herself. They had decided to hang out in the rose garden and enjoy the beauty and sweet scent. At the moment Kiba and Akamaru were playing around the front of the mansion. His mom had retreated back inside to give them all a little space.



"I guess I'm not really too worried about class, I mean I pretty much already know everything that's being covered. I'm more worried about the training time I'm losing. I feel like I'm wasting time doing nothing."

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. "You aren't wasting time you are recovering from a near fatal attack by two Jonins. Don't mistake not being able to do what you want to as being the same thing as wasting time."

Hinata nodded. "I agree. Please take it easy as you recover from your injuries Naruto-kun. I know how eager you are to get back to your routine but please take things slow and do not push too hard. You will be back to normal soon enough Naruto-kun. Do not hurt yourself worse trying to get there too soon."

"I know." He said gloomily. They were both right and he knew it.

All of a sudden Kiba came running around the corner of the mansion into the rose garden, Akamaru on his head barking. "She's coming!" He shouted out.

"Oh no!" Chouji cried out.

Shikamaru quickly closed up his shogi set and got up off the bench. "Well I'll see you again tomorrow Naruto!"

"Hey!" Naruto yelled at his supposed friends. "Are you guys going to just abandon me to face her alone?"

"Hell yeah!" Kiba dashed off.

"Yes!" Chouji waddled after him.

"I'm sorry Naruto. But like my dad says, 'a smart man knows when to cut and run.' We'll be back tomorrow." With that Shikamaru fled.

Naruto remained on the bench and watched them run for the woods on the estate. "Great, some ninjas *they'll* make, just abandoning a

comrade to his fate."

Knowing what was coming Hinata quickly sat down on the bench beside him where the shogi set had been. She had a determined look on her face. "Don't worry Naruto-kun / won't abandon you no matter what."

"Thank's Hinata-chan I knew I could count on you."

It didn't take long for her to appear. Rounding the corner came an eight year old blonde girl half buried by a huge assortment of flowers. When he'd woken up he'd found his room filled with flowers and about half of them had come from Ino. He had thought it a very sweet gesture. When she had come over with the other students after class to visit him he had thanked her for the flowers and told her he appreciated her thoughtfulness. That had been a terrible, terrible mistake. He'd left the hospital the following morning and come home. And every afternoon Ino had shown up with a large arrangement of flowers for him that she insisted on hand delivering to him. After which she would want to hang out with him. He couldn't quite bring himself to tell her he wanted her to just stop giving him flowers and leave him alone, so he would put up with her for an hour or two until his mom would come to his rescue.

When Ino saw him her eyes lit up and her smile expanded. "Hello Naruto-kun how are you feeling?"

"Fine Ino, thank you again for the flowers but you know you really don't need to give me any more of them. The casts come off tomorrow."

"Oh that's wonderful Naruto-kun! I'm so glad to hear that." She set the flowers down on a bench across from the one he and Hinata were occupying. She then placed his crutches on the ground so she could sit next to him on the bench. Only then did she, 'notice' Hinata. "Oh hello Hinata-chan! I didn't see you there. You know Hinata-chan I am sure you will be a great kunoichi especially when it comes to intelligence gathering. I mean you have a natural gift for being

invisible. You have no presence at all. How do you do that?" As she said all that she took his right arm and wrapped herself around it.

Hinata gave Ino a slight frown. "Oh I just think you have trouble seeing me Ino. Naruto-kun has always seen me."

Ino's smile seemed to grow sharper. "Oh I know that! He sees you as his *friend*. "

"Maybe so, but at least I don't have to invent excuses to come and see him outside of class. *I'm* welcome here anytime I want to come."

Naruto sighed as he knew it was going to be like this the entire time Ino was here. Hinata-chan was normally the sweetest person on earth but for some reason when Ino came around she seemed to develop some claws. It had surprised him the first couple times Hinata had argued with Ino around him. It was weird because listening to them talk it sounded like two girls fighting for a boy they both wanted to date. He knew that was what Ino wanted, but of course Hinata didn't feel that way.

After about two hours his mother mercifully put in an appearance to let Ino know he needed to get some rest. Mom walked Ino out and returned.

"Mom why did you wait so long to come and rescue me?" Naruto whined.

Kushina shook her head. "Because son if you don't suffer you won't learn anything. I *told* you not to give any of your fan girls any special compliments or attention. That only encourages them."

"But mom I didn't do it on purpose! I was just thanking her; I was just trying to be nice."

"Yes and this is the result." She let out a sigh. "I've informed her not to bring anymore flowers so you should be safe now. And I've gotten

some good news. Your godmother should be arriving some time today."

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"Naruto!" That was all the warning he got before he was swept up and pressed face forward into Tsunade's bosom. Had he been several years older he might have enjoyed the experience. As it was he was fighting for breath as his godmother threatened to smother him. "Oh Naruto-kun! As soon as I got your mother's message I got back here as fast as I possibly could!" She pulled his face up so she could start giving him kisses.

"Naruto-kun I am so glad you are all right! Lady Tsunade and I were both grief stricken at the thought we might lose you." Shizune began giving him some kisses of her own.

"Thanks godmother, thanks aunt Shizune, but really I'm fine. Well... except for my hand."

Tsunade put him back down and took a look at the swatch of bandages that enveloped his left hand. She had the most serious look on her face that Naruto had ever seen there. "All right Naruto, I am going to do a full check up on you not just your hand."

About a half hour later Naruto was in his room while Kushina, Tsunade, and Shizune were in the study.

"How bad is it?" Kushina asked worriedly.

Tsunade frowned. "Well it's not good. Every bone in his hand was fractured and there was a lot of tendon damage as well." Tsunade looked murderous. "If the bastard who did this to him were still alive I'd break every bone in his body and see how he enjoyed it."

"Can you fix it?"

Tsunade slowly nodded. "I believe I can. But it's going to take at least ten separate operations and we'll need to give the tissue time to heal

after each one." She sighed. "It'll probably take about two months to complete the series of operations and fully restore his hand."

"But once you're done he'll have full use of it again?" Kushina asked.

Tsunade nodded. "Yes, including being able to make hand signs." She looked rather embarrassed and troubled. "I'm afraid I won't be able to stay in Konoha during that entire time. I promise I'll come back each day he's scheduled to be operated on."

Kushina sent her old friend a sharp look. "What do you mean you won't be able to stay? If you're going to start telling me how you don't like it here or how it brings back bad memories I don't want to hear it. Your godson needs you right now and not just for the surgeries. There is no one I trust more to help him with his recovery. I want you here in Konoha the full time. You can stay right here in the mansion."

"It's not that, there are certain... difficulties involved with me staying in one place for an extended amount of time."

Kushina lifted an eyebrow and crossed her arms over her chest. "What difficulties exactly?"

"It's complicated." Tsunade said.

"Then explain slowly and use small words." Kushina said without humor.

Shizune stepped in. "The Lady Tsunade is deep in debt and wishes to avoid her creditors."

"Shizune!"

"Well you are Lady Tsunade!"

Kushina sighed. "How much?"

"Don't you dare answer that!" Tsunade barked.

"A little over seven million ryu total." Shizune replied easily.

Kushina's jaw dropped. "SEVEN MILLION!!" She stared at her friend in disbelief. "What is wrong with you Tsunade?! How could you possibly get that deep in debt?"

Tsunade looked a small child that had just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "Uhm, bad luck?"

Kushina just stared at her. "Shizune, do you have a list of her creditors and the amounts owed to each of them?"

"I do." Shizune nodded eagerly.

"Kushina I don't want your help! I refuse to take a hand out from a friend."

"That's good because I'm not offering you one."

"What?" Shizune said. "But I thought you'd want to help Lady Tsunade with her difficulties."

Kushina nodded. "Oh I do, but I'm not going to just hand over a small fortune so that she can go out and just do it again." She gave Tsunade a sharp look. "As I was trying to explain to Naruto earlier today if you don't suffer for your mistakes you don't learn anything."

Despite being a powerful Sannin Tsunade felt a bit nervous. "What do you have in mind?"

"You say you're having difficulties because of this money you owe? Fine then I'll pay off the seven million ryu you owe. I'll just take it out of your salary."

"Salary?" Tsunade asked. "What are you talking about?"

Kushina offered a very chill smile. "I'm hiring you as the Namikaze clan's private physician for the next four years. Until Naruto graduates the academy I expect you to live here and be on call for

any medical emergency. And while you're here you can also teach me and my son some medical jutsus and do some baby sitting."

"What?!" Tsunade demanded. "You expect me to live here and baby sit for you?"

"For the amount of money I'm giving you, you should be glad I don't expect you to sit in my kitchen and clean fish all day. Seven million ryo is not pocket change, if you owe that much you really are in serious trouble. Is there anyone else who would give it to you?" A thought occurred to Kushina. "Or will you just sell the Shodai's necklace?"

Tsunade's hands immediately clasped the necklace to her. "Never!"

Kushina crossed her arms over her chest again. "Then how will you pay for your debt?"

Tsunade opened her mouth but no sound came out.

Shizune stepped forward. "Lady Tsunade is Kushina's offer really so bad? We get to finally stop running about all the time and get settled for a while. We also get to live in a mansion while working for one of Konoha's most powerful clans. And you get to spend more time with your godson. Aren't you always complaining you never get to see him enough? If you think about it Kushina's offer sounds like a wonderful opportunity!"

Tsunade gave her young protégé a sour look. "You know how I feel about this damn village."

Kushina sighed. "I know you lost people you loved and that the village reminds you of that. For me this house and the rose garden are filled to overflowing with memories of Minato. But it is also the home I share with my son. Seeing him every day means more to me than any memory could. I know he would like seeing you more and so would I. Isn't that enough to balance out the memories of the ones you lost?"

Tsunade looked at her friend solemnly. Normally she would argue that the other person didn't understand. But Kushina had lost not only the man she loved but her whole family except for Naruto. *She lost more than I did, and she never ran away. Maybe it's time to try and face things.* Tsunade let out a slow sigh. "All right, I guess your offer is a fair one considering what it's going to cost you. And I would like to see more of you and Naruto." She slowly nodded. "I guess I'll be the family doctor for awhile."

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"Try and make a fist." Tsunade told him.

Grimacing Naruto tried but only his thumb and pinky responded. The three inner fingers remained stiff and barely twitched. "That's as much as I can do."

Tsunade nodded. "That's all right Naruto. This is just the first surgery. I promise you by the time I'm done your hand will be as good as new." She grinned at him. "You'll definitely be able to make hand signs."

Naruto nodded. "I know godmother. And even if I couldn't it wouldn't matter."

She lifted a blonde eyebrow. "Oh?"

"If I couldn't use my left hand to make hand signs then I'd figure out a way to make one handed signs or I'd just become a shinobi who didn't use jutsus."

She grinned at him. "So far as I know there had never been a shinobi who couldn't use jutsus."

He looked at her seriously. "Then I'd be the first. My dream is to be Hokage and I won't let *anything* stop me from reaching my dream."

She looked at her godson sadly. She'd known him since the moment she pulled him into this world and of course knew what his dream



was. But whenever he said those words she couldn't help but feel an ache in her heart. "Naruto, have you ever thought that being Hokage is not all fun and games."

Naruto looked at her in surprise. "God mother I've *never* thought that being Hokage was going to be fun or easy. My mother told me all about what it was like and I've talked to the Sandaime about it sometimes too. I know it is very hard and demands huge sacrifices, including your life sometimes."

"Then why?" She hadn't meant for him to hear that ache in her voice. "Why do you want something that won't bring you joy and may require your life?"

"Because I love this village and the people in it." The way he said it he seemed to think it was the most obvious thing in the world. "I want to protect them and do everything in my power to keep them safe."

"Even the ones who hate you?" She asked quietly.

He nodded. "Even them. I hope that someday I can win them over and have them finally see me for who I am. But even if I can't, even if some people will always hate me I still want to protect them. Because they are still part of this village and it is the Hokage's duty to protect the village."

*He is just like his father!* It was so obvious to her. She had known Minato since he'd become Jiraiya's student. He'd had the exact same earnestness and passion that she saw in Naruto.

There was a knock on the operating room door. "Lady Tsunade, the Hokage is here to see you." Shizune spoke excitedly. She the Hokage and Kushina entered the operating room.

"How did it go?" Kushina asked as she went to her son's side.

"It went about as well as I expected." Tsunade answered.

"Can I use my hand to spar with?" Naruto asked.

"NO!" Tsunade and Kushina said in a chorus. Tsunade expanded on the answer. "Not only are you not allowed to spar for the next two months, no using that hand for any training period. No push ups, no pull ups, no monkey bars, nothing that will put any stress on the bones and tendons. Understand?"

"But can't I at least..."

"NO!" Both women again answered in unison. Naruto sat back and admitted defeat.

"It is very good to see you again Tsunade." Sarutobi said. "I am also pleased to hear that this time you'll be staying in the village."

Tsunade frowned. She knew her sensei well enough to guess where he was going. "It's not permanent I still don't care much for Konoha. But I will be here at least until my godson graduates the academy. I have to work off a debt."

"I see, well in that case is there any chance you might be willing to teach some of our young medic nins? They would certainly benefit from your instruction."

That was very well said. She certainly couldn't deny the truth of that and she had been the one who had originally pushed for the creation of a corps of medic nins in the first place. Helping the next generation of medic nins save lives was actually something that appealed to her. She considered it. "Well old man I don't know. First off I already have a job so you'd have to ask my employer here if it would be all right."

Kushina grinned. "I have no objection if you want to teach on your off hours. Just so long as you're still available for babysitting duties."

" If I do agree to teach some people I decide the curriculum and who I teach. I would have to have final say in all matters concerning my

instruction old man."

Sarutobi nodded. "Of course. Will you do so then?"

She frowned. She'd expected him to set up at least a few conditions. Part of her wanted to say no just on general principle. But then she thought of all the young ninjas out there whose lives might be saved if she did this. That settled the question. "All right."

"Excellent." He smiled at her. "I'll leave you to make arrangements with the hospital staff and inform them to give you whatever you ask for. I have work to do now but I really am very happy to know you'll be staying with us for awhile." With that he left the operating room.

Shizune noticed the look on Tsunade's face. "Lady Tsunade aren't you pleased with the chance to teach others what you know?"

"Of course Shizune, if I weren't I'd have turned the old man down."

"Then why do you look unhappy?" Shizune asked.

She sighed. "Because I know that old man, and I am sure he is up to something."

## Three years at the academy

Though it didn't happen fast enough to suit him Naruto's hand and overall health eventually recovered fully. He returned to class after missing only one week. Though he pleaded to be allowed to fight one handed he was barred from sparring until his hand was completely healed. During this brief interval Sasuke enjoyed a temporary return to prominence as he dominated the sparring matches and ascended to the number one ranking. When Naruto's hand was healed and he was cleared to spar again order was restored. Sasuke and Sakura were an official couple and she seemed to resent Naruto's eclipsing her Sasuke-kun more than he did. Sasuke no longer seemed to be looking for ways to confront Naruto. But even if Sasuke was a bit easier to deal with Naruto didn't trust him. He would never trust any Uchiha. The fact that Sakura had finally gotten the boy she wanted infuriated Ino and drove her to pursue Naruto even harder. There were no more survival exercises held outside the walls. Tsunade began giving lessons to a small group of medic nins she had hand picked. She did however still have time to baby sit.

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She leaned over the young boy and glared at him. "You really think you have a chance against me?" She did her very best to seem menacing.

Naruto faced her with a calm façade, his blue eyes serene. "You don't scare me."

Shizune sighed. "If Kushina finds out about this she won't be happy."

And sure enough. "Hey everyone the Council meeting actually ended early for once and..." She came to a halt just a couple steps into the dining room. What she saw shocked her. "Tsunade! What are you doing with my son?"

"Nothing! I'm just playing with him like a good godmother and baby sitter should." Tsunade declared with an affronted tone.

Kushina frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. "You are playing *cards* with him!"

Tsunade nodded. "Yes, but I *am* playing with him."

Kushina glared at her. "I do *not* want my son gambling!"

"Gambling? Do you see any money?" In front of her was a small pile of candy. In front of Naruto was a slightly larger pile. Kushina continued to glare. Tsunade sighed and shoved all her candy into the space between her and Naruto. "O.k. Naruto let's make this the last hand. I'm all in."

Naruto shrugged. "O.k. godmother." He pushed his candy into the middle as well.

Tsunade chuckled and shook her head. "Naruto never play a hand just because the other person expects you to. You actually played pretty well tonight but you lost everything on the very last hand." She put her cards down with a flourish. "Full house, jacks over nines."

Naruto put his cards down. "Four sevens."

"What?!" She gawked at him. "But you didn't draw any cards!"

He again shrugged. "I got them at the start." All three women stared at him. The odds of drawing four of a kind were about the same as winning the lottery. "What?" He began picking through his winnings for certain pieces of candy.

Shizune giggled. "Lady Tsunade you just lost to a nine year old who has never played cards before."

"Now I can understand how you managed to run up over seven million in gambling debts." Kushina said flatly.

Tsunade ignored them and focused on the really important thing.  
"What amazing luck!" She sounded impressed. "He really has a gift."

" *Wonderful.* " Kushina said.

Naruto went up to his mother holding about a dozen pieces of candy.  
"Here mom."

She smiled at her son. "Thank you honey but I really don't want you... oh! Are these double mint fudge?"

Naruto nodded. "They sure are."

She took his offerings and quickly popped one into her mouth. She leaned down and kissed her son's cheek. "You are *such* a good boy." She smiled and shook her head. "All right Naruto-kun collect your winnings and off to bed." Her son happily nodded and was soon gone. Kushina noticed a far away look in Tsunade's eyes.

"You know Kushina there's a casino in Talumet without a minimum gambling age. With his luck and my knowledge..."

"Good night Tsunade."

---

The first year ended with Naruto, Sasuke, and Hinata holding the top three spots. The summer passed peacefully enough. It was the first summer where Naruto had friends other than Hinata to play with. The security measures around him had not loosened. He occasionally visited his friends on special occasions such as Chouji's birthday. However it was much easier for his friends to come and visit him. During that summer his friends would come over regularly to play. Though Naruto did have a different definition of play.

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"This is team leader to dog boy. What is your status?"

"This is dog boy target is in sight."

"This is lazy boy. It's a drag but I have the target about fifteen feet away."

"Plump boy what's your status? Plump boy please respond. Plump boy? Chouji! Put the chips down and answer!"

"Munch... munch... plump boy here. Target is in sight."

"Pretty girl what is your status?"

"This is pretty girl. Target is in sight. Ready on your order team leader."

"All right team Naruto on my mark... go!"

Four ninjas (sort of) leapt from the bushes. An orange and black frog about the size of a small dog leapt twenty feet in the air. "Hah! You'll never take me alive!"

As Naruto watched from a nearby tree Kiba, Chouji, and Shikamaru crashed into each other and wound up in a scrum on the ground. Hinata and Akamaru managed to avoid the pile up.

Looking at all the boys tangled up with one another Hinata pressed the send button on her radio communicator. "Uhm, Naruto-kun?"

He sighed. "Yes Hinata-chan?"

"I think we've lost the target."

"Man this is troublesome. Can we watch clouds now?"

He shut his eyes and slowly shook his head. "All right team Naruto I'm aborting the mission. Let's go watch clouds instead."

"Can you get your mom to make us some of her cookies?"

"Sure Chouji."

"Hey Naruto, do you have any milk for Akamaru?"

"Sure."

Gamakichi landed on the tree branch next to him. "They didn't catch me so I get two bags of chips right?"

"Sure." *I really need to work on my leadership skills.*

---

The second year had begun with a small difference. Kurenai had been reassigned. Hiashi decided that his daughter's protection could be entrusted to a member of the cadet branch of the Hyuga who was a third year student. Naruto had known Neji as long as he had Hinata. But he and Neji had never become friends. Despite many stays at the Hyuga mansion and many painful efforts he had never managed to break through the boy's formal and rigid exterior. He had also slowly come to realize Neji's method of talking down to Hinata with insults camouflaged as politeness. In addition he and Neji had contradictory philosophies.

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"I must respectfully disagree with you Naruto-san." Neji said in that calm superior tone of his. "If you do become Hokage it is because you were destined to."

"Destined? You make it sound like being Hokage is reserved for me. Believe me it's not. I sweat and push myself to the limit so I can prove myself worthy of being Hokage. When I become Hokage it will be because I *earned* it."

Neji gave him that smug smirk that always got underneath Naruto's skin. "I am afraid you misunderstand me Naruto-san. I am not suggesting that becoming Hokage is easy or does not demand sacrifice. What I *am* saying is that your birth has pre-selected you to be Hokage, if you do in fact become Hokage. Think for a moment how many ninja there are from all the villages, and how very few will ever even be considered for the position of Kage. Thus those who



become Kages of their villages were all born with that destiny. Consider your own birth. You were born the heir of one of Konoha's most powerful and respected clans. Even more importantly you are the son of a Hokage. Clearly, your birth has pre-selected you for greatness. If you do become Hokage one day it will not be because of your exceptional effort or work habits. Tell me Naruto-san, do you believe if you had been born the son of a mechanic or a carpenter that you could ever become Hokage no matter how hard you worked?"

"If my will was strong enough and I was ready to commit to it no matter what, then yes I could. If you believe in your dream with your whole heart and give everything over to it you can do anything." Naruto answered fervently.

Neji cracked a self satisfied laugh. "Easy enough for you to say."

Naruto halted and everyone else did as well. He turned to fully face Neji. "What the hell does that mean?"

Neji faced him with complete confidence. "It means it is very easy to believe anything is possible when you have been gifted with one of the rare births that truly allows that. If you stand up and proclaim you will be Hokage one day no one laughs at your ambition because they all recognize that for you it is possible. And why? Because of how hard you work or how strong your will is? No, it is the simple fact that your last name is Namikaze. You are Namikaze Naruto, son of a Hokage; for you anything truly is possible. But if you were Machuki Naruto, son of a plumber; and you made the same proclamation everyone would laugh at you."

Naruto smiled. "You know what? I'm sure they would. But even if the whole world laughed, it doesn't mean I couldn't still do it."

Neji just shook his head. "Such unbelievable arrogance. Only someone born at the very top could ever truly believe that. Only someone who has never struggled could think that way."

"Never struggled? People have been trying to kill me my entire life!"

Neji grimaced. "You should consider that as simply the price tag for all that you have been given thanks to your birth. The powerful are always hated." He seemed to grimace a bit. "Always!" The two boys locked gazes.

Kushina coughed. "Shall we get going?"

Neji nodded. "Of course Kushina-san.

"Sure mom."

Neji bowed slightly. "I apologize if my harsh truths wound your ideals." Naruto just frowned at him. Neji had a real gift for making apologies sound like insults. Naruto decided not to bother responding. Their argument was pointless as neither of them would ever be able to change the other's mind.

---

Second year students began learning the basics of chakra control. For students like Naruto, Sasuke, and Hinata much of their time was a waste as they were forced to the same pace as their classmates. Each Saturday Naruto and Hinata would go through the same murderous workout beside his mom. Throughout the second year at the academy Hinata built up her endurance and was able to last for seven hours of the workout. Naruto had invited his other friends to join them. Shikamaru and Chouji had paled upon hearing the description. Kiba joined in some times; he liked the challenge of trying to keep up the pace Naruto set. By the end of the year he was able to last about four hours. But most Saturdays it was just him and Hinata.

---

"Want to sit in the rose garden for a little bit before you go home Hinata-chan?"

"Sure Naruto-kun." The two of them sat down on one of the wooden benches. Kushina had gone inside and so the two of them had a little privacy.

"The sunset is really beautiful." Naruto remarked. "The whole sky is just red and orange."

Hinata looked westward and nodded appreciatively. "It is very beautiful." She let out a content sigh. She loved the rose garden on the Namikaze estates. Though soon it would be winter and the roses would all be gone until the spring. It was all ready getting a bit cool. She rubbed her arms. Seeing that Naruto reached out and pulled her onto his lap. "Eek!" She stared at him as he wrapped his arms around hers. "Naruto-kun what are you doing?"

He grinned and pulled her close to him. "I saw you were cold and I wanted to help you keep warm. Is something wrong Hinata-chan?"

"Uhm no." Sitting on his lap with his arms wrapped around her they were almost nose to nose. *Our faces are so close. If I just leaned in and kissed his lips what would he say?*

"Hinata-chan are you feeling all right? Your face is turning red." He put a hand on her forehead and had a look of concern.

"Uhm, I'm fine Naruto-kun. I'm just a little tired." She settled for just putting her head down on his shoulder.

"Say Hinata-chan, why did you decide to grow your hair out?"

"Oh well most of the other girls have long hair and I just thought I would try it too. Do you uhm, like it?"

"Yeah, I think it makes you look even prettier than usual."

She knew her face had darkened again. She could never in her life hear that enough from him. "Thank you Naruto-kun." They didn't say

much more after that. They just sat there together on the bench keeping each other warm as they watched the sun leave the sky.

From a second story window Kushina watched them. Protective surveillance she would call it or spying as Naruto would call it. Watching the kids she smiled fondly.

---

The second year ended with Naruto maintaining his dominance of the class. Sasuke remained second. And Hinata was third. During the school year there was an assassination attempt on Naruto. It failed, and the Chunin ended up dead with Naruto's sword through his heart. It was yet another harsh reminder, not that he needed one that there were *always* enemies about. He and Sasuke developed a very frosty relationship. Sasuke did not look for confrontations with him any more, but there were times when Naruto could feel his eyes burrowing into his back. Naruto honestly didn't know what to make of Sasuke. He was a rival and an Uchiha so there would be no friendship. But he couldn't gauge how strong the passions were in the dark haired boy. Most of the time Sasuke would seem to quiet and brooding, except when Sakura was with him. Then he would normally lighten up. The relationship between Sasuke and Sakura was best summed up by the fact that some of the other girls had taken to calling her, 'puppy.' During the summer along with his workouts he and Hinata began to receive training in medical jutsus from Tsunade alongside his mom. These lessons from Tsunade were absolutely excruciating for Naruto. As Tsunade was want to say medical jutsus were based on just one thing; chakra control. She would point out that for healing using too much chakra was actually *worse* than using too little. Unlike most of his other jutsus where overloading chakra only made them even more effective. He also felt slightly embarrassed by the fact that his mom was fairly good at picking things up and Hinata actually seemed to have a talent for it. Meanwhile he struggled to do even the most basic of jutsus. Fortunately he had an escape... sometimes.

---

"Listen kid how would you like to learn one of your father's original jutsus?"

Naruto's ears immediately perked up. "Is it an offensive jutsu?"

Jiraiya chuckled. "Oh you could say that. It's an A level wind based attack jutsu that took your father three years to develop." He held out his palm and began to swirl chakra around it. "This is called rasengan."

Naruto's eyes expanded as the chakra seemed to swirl faster and faster while staying contained in a small sphere in his palm. "Wow! How powerful is it?"

Jiraiya smiled. "Kid see that tree?" At Naruto's nod Jiraiya dashed over to it and drove his right palm into the middle of the thick trunk. As Naruto watched the rasengan bored through it with ease. When Jiraiya pulled his hand back there was a smooth about a foot wide going through the tree. Naruto could easily imagine what that kind of force could do to a person.

"That was sooo cool! Pervy granddad you *have* to teach me this!"

Jiraiya frowned at him. "I'll teach you on one condition Naruto."

"Anything!"

"Stop calling me pervy granddad! I am the great and all knowing Toad Sage!"

Grinning Naruto gave the old man a bow. "Jiraiya-san, will you please teach me this jutsu?"

Smiling Jiraiya nodded. "Finally a little respect. You can knock off the san nonsense, though I wouldn't mind you calling me sensei like your father did. O.k. Naruto now to begin with..."

"Naruto!"

They both stopped to see and angry blonde storming towards them. "Naruto what are you doing out here with *him* ? Come on it's time for instruction Kushina and Hinata are both waiting."

"Uhm actually godmother if it's o.k. with you I think I'd like to stay here and work with Jiraiya-sensei."

She stiffened as if she'd just been slapped. " *Jiraiya-sensei!* Since when do you call him that? And why don't you call *me* sensei?"

Jiraiya smiled smugly. "You can't blame the kid Tsunade. He wants to learn something **useful** ."

A vein immediately began throbbing in her forehead. "Listen you old pervert *nothing* is more useful than medical jutsus!"

"But godmother," Naruto whined. "I can't work any of them! Whenever I try you spend all your time telling me I have to use less chakra! Can't I just work here learning attack jutsus while you teach my mom and Hinata?" He asked pleadingly.

Tsunade gave him as warm a smile as she could manage while thinking about throttling Jiraiya. "Now Naruto-kun, I'm sure you'll get the hang of this you just need more practice that's all." She then looked at her former teammate. "And you! Stop hounding me! I don't appreciate you stalking me like this you know!"

Jiraiya looked affronted. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh cut the crap! Ever since I came back here you've suddenly been in Konoha an awful lot. And why do you stay here when you're in the village anyway?"

He waved an arm at the three story mansion. "What? There aren't any spare rooms? Are you the only one who gets to stay here?"

" / don't own any property in this village anymore. How many houses do you own? Five? Six?"

He grinned at her and shrugged. "What can I say Tsunade? I feel at home here and Kushina did invite me."

"She only did that because you were whining like a spoiled child that I was staying here! And she never thought you'd actually move in!"

He smiled. "My, my Tsunade, but I do seem to bring out the passion in you."

"You sure do and the passion is called hate." She grabbed Naruto by the right arm and began to drag him toward the house. "Come on Naruto let's go."

"Hey! He's staying here with me!" Jiraiya grabbed Naruto by the other arm and yanked him back.

"No! He's coming with me!" She pulled him hard.

"He's staying right here!" He pulled back hard.

"Let go!" She grabbed on with both hands and began to pull.

"No, you let go!" Jiraiya grabbed on with both hands as well and began to strain.

"He's mine!"

"No mine!"

"Mine!"

"Mine!"

"Stop! You're tearing my arms out!" Naruto cried out. Mercifully they both let go.

Jiraiya stood in front of her and tried to look imposing. "Look flat chested Tsunade the boy obviously wants *me* to teach him! So what are you going to do about it?"

That was so the wrong question to ask.

"Come on Naruto and from now on when I'm teaching you I expect you to call me Tsunade-sensei."

As she led him back inside he was far too frightened of what he'd just seen to argue with her. "Yes Tsunade-sensei. Uhm shouldn't you at least check his vitals? You hit him pretty hard."

"He's fine." She assured him.

Naruto looked back at the prone figure. "Tsunade-sensei you really hit him pretty hard. I think he might be dead!"

Tsunade sighed. "Trust me Naruto I'm just not that lucky."

---

The most memorable thing to happen in Naruto's third year took place during a recess early in September.

---

The boy was fighting to hold back his tears. Just like always he was all alone. Everyone told him to quit, everyone told him he was wasting his time. Not just the other kids but his teachers and even his parents told him he should face up to reality and give up. But he *couldn't* ! It was what he had always dreamed of and it meant everything to him. But lately he'd begun to wonder if he was just fooling himself. No one believed in him! Not one single person he was completely alone! And here he was again being taunted and attacked by five other boys. They yelled at him to quit, to give up. They were going to beat him and show him he wasn't a real ninja. He fought back the tears and readied himself for one more fight one more beating. But he began to wonder how many more of these hopeless stands he had left in him.

"Why don't you just give up Lee? We're sick of you and your stupid speeches and your stupid standing there trying to work a jutsu that



you never will! You're just a waste! Just quit and stop wasting everyone's time!"

"I won't quit! I'll show all of you that I can be a ninja even if I can't use chakra!"

"You're such an idiot! There's no such thing as a ninja who can't work a jutsu!" The other boy taunted.

"Then I'll be the first!" Lee shouted. "I don't care what it takes! I'll be a ninja because that is my dream!"

"Hot blooded idiot." The boy smiled at his friends as they got ready to rush in. Then he felt a pain in the back of his head and everything went black.

The entire courtyard watched as Naruto launched himself at the remaining four boys, all of whom were fourth year students. He beat them down in less than thirty seconds. Just that quick Naruto was standing in the middle of the circle with five kids either unconscious or on the grounds crying.

Lee stood there gaping at the blonde boy wearing the Hokage cloak. He had no idea what to do.

Naruto smiled and held out his hand. "Hi, I'm Namikaze Naruto. Pleased to meet you."

The words seemed to snap him out of it. Lee immediately bowed to the boy. "I am pleased to meet you as well Naruto-san! I am Rock Lee."

Naruto rubbed the back of his head. "You all right Lee? I hope you don't mind me getting involved in your fight. I just can't stand bullies." He looked down at the boys who were still awake. "I have no respect for those who use their strength just to torment others. You should use your strength to protect others."

"No I do not mind Naruto-san. In fact I thank you for your assistance."

"What sort of game are you playing at Naruto-san?"

The cool and disdainful voice made Lee stiffen and brought a frown to Naruto's face. "I'm not playing anything I saw someone who needed help and so I helped him."

Neji looked to his classmate and then looked back to Naruto. "Do you even know who it is you intervened to help? This boy," Neji refused to even say his name. "Is a complete and utter failure who by his mere presence wastes the valuable time and resources of our instructors. He is a failure and should quit."

Naruto began getting angry. "Neji if you say one more damn word I'm going to knock you on your ass."

Lee gasped. Neji was a genius of the Hyuga clan. *No one* spoke to him like that. Neji stood his ground and carefully eyed Naruto up and down reading his body language and coming to a conclusion. "You are serious."

"Damn right." He nodded.

"Why?" Neji asked, genuinely curious. "Why would you be willing to fight me and risk angering the Hyuga clan for the sake of someone you don't even know?"

"Because he's someone who needed help, that's all I need to know."

Neji grinned derisively. "And when you are Hokage Naruto-san will you spend all your time getting cats out of trees and helping little old ladies cross the street?"

Naruto shrugged. "I guess it depends on how much time I have." Seeing everyone looking he raised his voice. "I don't like seeing people attacked just because their weaker. That is what cowards and

criminals do. Shinobi fight to defend themselves or to serve their village, not to make themselves feel better by beating up those who are weaker!"

The kids listened and nodded taking his words to heart. Neji grinned and shook his head. "You know Naruto-san you really are filled to overflowing with foolish ideals. Only a fool would *really* believe that the strong shouldn't take advantage of the weak. That is not how the world works."

Naruto smiled. "Then I guess I'll just have to change how the world works. If it is foolish Neji then I would rather stay a fool and hold on to my ideals." Neji smirked and simply walked away truly amused. Naruto looked at the boy he had just saved. *Wow he has thick eyebrows.* "Listen Lee I heard what you said about being a ninja even if you can't use jutsus."

Lee's eyes fell to the ground and he prepared to hear again how he should give up.

"I just wanted to tell you that I agree with you. If it's what you truly want then make it happen. I'm sure you can be a ninja even without using chakra."

Lee's head shot up. This was the very first time anyone had given him any encouragement since it had become clear he couldn't work jutsus. "Do you really mean that Naruto-san?"

"Yes I do! I believe that if your will is strong enough and your willing to work hard you can do anything! If it's your dream to be a ninja then follow your dream and don't let anyone stop you!"

Lee felt a weight lift up off his heart and suddenly felt real hope that maybe it wasn't impossible. He bowed deeply. "Arigato Naruto-san!"

"Hey just call me Naruto. Listen do you want to be friends?"

"Friends?"

"Sure! You seem like a really good guy and I would like us to be friends. If you want you can even come work out with me this Saturday."

Lee was deeply touched and bowed once more. "Naruto-san I am deeply grateful but I'm not worthy of being friends with the heir of the Namikaze clan."

"Who says?" Naruto asked. Lee didn't know how to answer that. "Listen, don't worry about that. If you want to be friends I'd like that. And if you want to train with me we start at 7 in the morning." He turned to leave but before he did so he raised his voice again. "And if anyone messes with my friend Lee here they mess with me too."

Lee watched him go and decided he would definitely go to the Namikaze estates Saturday.

---

In the third year the academy began to concentrate on team building exercises. The instructors tried to drive home the fact that they were expected to be able to work with comrades even if their personalities did not mesh, or even if they disliked each other. This lesson was driven home when Naruto was paired with Sasuke. They did not like each other; they did not trust each other. But they did complete the exercise. During the year Rock Lee became a friend. His mother liked him very much; she just thought he was so damn earnest. Lee adapted to Naruto's training better than anyone ever had. By the end of the year when Lee graduated the academy (despite not being able to make a bushin) he had been able to perform the full ten hour program. Hinata was up to eight and a half hours and Kiba could last six. Seeing Lee do so well motivated Kiba even more and he began coming around on most Saturdays. Tsunade refused to give up teaching Naruto medical jutsus and eventually he was able to perform some of the basic ones. But even Tsunade was willing to admit he would never be able to work the most complex ones. Hinata was a natural and Tsunade began thinking of her as an apprentice. She and Naruto were the only academy students she taught. Her class at the hospital was made up of Genins and

Chunins. Jiraiya was also teaching him (though never again at a time when Tsunade was scheduled to.) By the end of the year Naruto had mastered the rasengan. Jiraiya was impressed at how quickly he had picked it up. His father after all had needed three years to master it. At the end of his third year at the academy Naruto was clearly mid Jonin level. As the hot summer days wore down and the final school year approached there were changes in the air. Not only for him but for all of Konoha.

---

"You wanted to talk to me?" Tsunade asked. They were on top of the Tower and Sarutobi was looking up at the cliff faces.

"Yes, thank you for coming to meet with me Tsunade."

"No problem old man. So what's this about?"

"Have you enjoyed your time back in the village Tsunade?"

She frowned at him. He was definitely up to something. "Some of it," she admitted. "I will admit I did enjoy teaching again. Some of the younger generation of this village are very surprising." She smiled. "And then there's Naruto. He really is an amazing child. He's going to be quite an amazing man and ninja one day."

"And Hokage?" Sarutobi asked quietly.

She thought about that for a moment. "Yes. It's not what I would ever want for him. But that little kid *will* be Hokage one day." She smiled fondly. "And do you know what else? He really will be the greatest Hokage ever."

Sarutobi studied her. "You do not agree with his ambition. But would you help him achieve it?"

She thought about it and slowly nodded. "Yes I would. Not only because it is his dream but because it was Dan's and Nawaki's as

well. Their dream is alive in him now. And so long as my godson truly wants it I would help him any way that I could."

Sarutobi nodded slowly. "I am very glad to hear that Tsunade. For there is a way you can almost guarantee he becomes Hokage."

That got her attention. "And how's that?"

"Name him your successor once he is ready."

"What? What are you talking about old man?" Tsunade was suddenly *very* nervous.

Sarutobi grinned. "Just as you say Tsunade. I really am an old man now. I have been ready for retirement for many years, but I have waited until I had a replacement ready."

She began to go pale. "Oh no! Don't you dare say it!"

"Tsunade, I ask you to succeed me, and become the Fifth Hokage."

## The nasty prank

They were fourth year students. At the academy they felt like lords of the earth. It was during the final year at the academy that the instructors finally showed them the mysteries of how to work jutsus. It was during the final year that they began discussing such things as assassination techniques and the disposal of bodies. By this point all the weak willed and unsure ones were gone. The students who were still there knew they wanted to be ninja. Or at least thought they did. Some would not be able to handle the brutal reality when it finally hit them. Some would not *survive* that very first brush with real ninja life. But at least the kids thought they were ready to face it. Naruto and Sasuke had already faced that reality and both had come to grips with it in their own way.

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Sakura looked terribly uncomfortable and nervous. He honestly wondered if she would have the nerve to do it. "Sasuke-kun why do you want me to do this again?"

He gave her that shy grin he had worked on in the mirror this morning. As it always did the look made her face darken just a little. With practiced ease he reached out a single hand to stroke her cheek. He could see the breathe shudder out of her. She was so ridiculously easy to read. She looked at him with such pathetic longing. He'd found the perfect equilibrium with her. He would give her just enough attention to leave her hungry for more. He always gave her just enough hope to think all her dreams were within reach. In the whole time she had been his girlfriend he had never once kissed her. He had also most definitely never said the 'L' word. He would smile, joke with her, pay her attention when started one of her mindless lectures, he would take her out to nice places to eat, and he would hold her hand or touch her cheek. And that was all it took for him to make her do anything he wanted. So far. But he needed to know just how far he could take it. That's why he had come up with this test.

"Sakura-chan." He said in a soft and comforting voice. "Think of this as proof that you really would do anything for me."

She looked hurt. "But Sasuke-kun don't you all ready know that?"

He slowly shook his head. "Sakura-chan I'm not talking about meeting me for a date or lending me some of your kunai. Before long we are going to Genin going on real missions facing real danger. I need to know I can count on you even in the most trying of circumstances."

"Oh Sasuke-kun! What if we don't end up on the same team together?" She seemed on the verge of tears. "My heart would break if we couldn't be together."

*Just what do you know about real heart ache? Real tragedy?* Like all girls her age she lived on romantic fantasies and drama. He tried very hard not to sigh. *Fine if you need drama I'll give you drama.* He took her hands into his and looked deep into her eyes. "Sakura-chan think of this as a test of faith. If you do this you'll prove to me that you really would do anything for me. Don't you think Kami would reward such devotion?"

"Do you really think so Sasuke-kun?" She could feel her heart flutter.

He nodded his head and kept eye contact with her. "I do Sakura-chan. If you do this for me I am sure Kami will make sure we are together after we graduate." And if Kami was unwilling he was sure his clan would.

"Then I'll do it Sasuke-kun."

---

Kushina and the Hyuga branch member who had escorted them departed. Hand in hand, just like always the two of them entered the academy grounds. A bunch of their classmates were outside talking or just hanging out. Kiba and Shikamaru both waved to them. Naruto



and Hinata waved back. "Does it feel any different to you? Being a senior now?"

Hinata considered it. "Not really," she answered. "I mean we have a different home room now but we have the same classmates and teachers. Does it feel different to you Naruto-kun?"

He nodded excitedly. "This is the last year. In nine months we graduate and I *finally* get to start my career as a real ninja. I can start building a reputation and begin the path to being Hokage."

Hinata had also thought some about graduation. But she didn't smile. She was somber and serious. "Naruto-kun, what happens if we don't end up on the same team together?"

He gave her hand a comforting squeeze. "If it happens Hinata-chan we'll just have to make the best of it. It's not like we won't still see each other when we're in the village. I mean even once we start our careers we won't be on missions all the time."

Hinata cast her eyes down. "Wouldn't you miss me if you didn't see me every day Naruto-kun?"

With one hand he gently tipped up her chin so she could see his eyes again and that beautiful smile of his. "Of course I would Hinata-chan. I love getting to be with you all the time. But we are shinobi and we have a duty to our village to carry out the orders and assignments given to us. I'd love to be on a team with you. But if it doesn't happen we'll both have to do our best with whoever we're assigned. I mean what else can we do?" He said reasonably.

*Fight like hell to be together!* She didn't say that of course. Naruto's answer was the right one. And if Kami willed it, it was what they would both do. Oh but she would have liked it if he had said there was no chance they would be on separate teams. She would have liked it even more if he had declared he would fight for them to be together. "I know you're right Naruto-kun I just want to stay by your side." She noticed from the corner of her eye Sakura approaching

them to say, 'hi.' Hinata frowned wondering why Sasuke's girlfriend would give either of them the time of day.

Naruto saw her from the corner of his eye and something warned him. He couldn't have explained what it was. But always being in danger had given him sharpened senses and he could spot threats. As Sakura's hand came out from behind her back he instinctively leapt back. Still holding Hinata's hand he pulled her rearward with him. Sakura held what looked like a big water balloon and whipped it at him as fast as she possibly could. She'd been aiming for Naruto's chest but he'd moved too quickly. The balloon struck Hinata instead. It exploded in a shower of pig's blood drenching Hinata dark blue shirt and pants. The back splash got Naruto and the white Hokage cloak was splattered with blood. The instant he landed he glared at the little pink haired girl.

Sakura saw a look in Naruto's eyes that reminded her of an angry wolf. She thought her heart stopped for a second. She opened her mouth to apologize but Naruto seemed to be on her instantly. With one hand he grabbed her by the front of her red dress and yanked her completely up off the ground. She could feel killer intent radiate off the boy and she saw his eyes filled with rage. For just an instant, for just half a second, she really thought he was going to kill her.

"What the hell was that?! Why did you do that?!" Naruto shook her violently back and forth to give his words some emphasis.

She couldn't help it she began to cry. "It was just a joke!" She wailed. "I didn't mean any harm!" He was still holding her up off the ground with one hand. She felt completely and totally at his mercy. *Sasuke please come and help me!*

Luckily for her Hinata was at Naruto's side and had her hands gently on his arms. "Naruto-kun it's all right! No harm has been done."

Naruto looked at her. "No harm? Hinata-chan you're covered in blood!" Naruto was seething.

Hinata nodded and spoke calmly. "I agree what Sakura did was *not* nice." She sent the crying girl a frown and then turned back to Naruto. "But she didn't hurt me. Please don't do anything that will get you in trouble or that you will regret later."

She was giving him a pleading look that seemed to just drain his anger away. "Fine." He put Sakura back down and let go of her. "Don't ever do anything like this again Sakura."

"I won't! I swear!" With that she ran away from him as fast as she could.

Naruto reached down to his belt and switched on his radio. "Mom can you come back to the academy please?"

"Is something wrong dear?"

He sighed. "Nothing serious, Hinata and I just had a nasty prank played on us and we need to go home to change our clothes."

"All right honey, I'll be there in about a minute."

"Naruto-kun we can't go home! Class is about to start we'll be late if we leave now."

He gave her a firm look. "Hinata-chan we are *not* starting the first day of our senior year looking like casualties from a battle. If we're a little late it won't be the end of the world." As they waited Kiba, Shikamaru, and Chouji came up and asked what had happened. Most of their classmates had seen what happened and were buzzing about it.

Ino had seen what had happened and had watched as Sakura ran away to hurry to her boyfriend. Ino didn't fail to notice that Sasuke had watched everything from a comfortable spot leaning against the wall. He had watched the entire event without taking a single step to help his girlfriend. Now that it was over she could see he was hugging Sakura and trying to comfort her. Now that it was over.

---

Kushina had watched the confrontation in the schoolyard. It made her sad that someone who she thought of as a nice girl from a good family would do something so hateful. Though she thought balloons filled with blood were still better than kunai and swords.

---

Ino went up to Sakura in the girls' room. They were alone and so she had the chance to talk to her best friend. "What was that this morning?"

"Oh, it was just a little joke." Sakura said weakly.

"Uh-huh, and whose idea was this little joke?"

Sakura looked away from the mirror to face her directly. "Mine."

"Bull!" Ino said sharply. "Don't cover for that jerk! I know you would never do something like this on your own. It's obvious Sasuke made you do it."

"Shut up Ino-pig! You're just mad because your precious Naruto got a little blood on him." Sakura snapped.

"No." Ino said flatly. "I don't like what you did to Naruto but it's not like this is the first time he's had blood on his clothes. He'll deal with it. I'm upset because I don't like seeing my best friend getting used."

"Used! You don't know anything! Sasuke would never use me! He just needed me to prove my love to him."

Ino frowned. "So it was his idea."

Sakura gave her an angry look. "Listen Ino-pig if you say anything to anyone I'll call you a liar."

"Don't worry that's not my style. I prefer to deal with things on my own. Sakura can't you see what's going on? Sasuke's using you! Do

you think if he really cared about you he would have put you in that situation?"

Sakura glared at the blonde. "You are such a backstabbing lying bitch! What is it? Are you just jealous that the boy I love actually cares for me? Or have you finally given up on Naruto and decided to go after Sasuke?"

Ino actually felt a slight shiver. "No thanks! He's a little too cold for my tastes."

"Cold? What are you talking about? My Sasuke-kun is the sweetest boy in the whole world!"

"Sure," Ino agreed. "When you're right there in front of him. The rest of the time he's usually just brooding. He never smiles, he never laughs, he's just a bottomless pit. I don't know what happened to him but he's not the same boy that he was. He's changed over the last few years."

"No he hasn't! He's still the same sweet boy he always was! He cares about me and he's good to me."

"Good to you huh?" Ino crossed her arms. "You mean like when he has you try and piss off Naruto while he stands back and watches? Is that being good to you?"

"You don't understand!"

"Oh I understand all right! Sakura wake up! Sasuke is *using* you! If he really did care about you he wouldn't have put you in that situation. Sakura you need to leave him."

"Hah! I knew it!" Sakura nodded triumphantly. "You finally woke up to the fact that Naruto will never want you as long as he has Hinata. You just want me to break up with Sasuke-kun so you can move in and get him for yourself. Well sorry to disappoint you Ino-pig but

that's *never* going to happen." With that she stormed out of the girls' room."

Ino watched her best friend go and sighed. "Sakura..."

---

Naruto waited in the hall as the students began to filter out and head home. As usual Sasuke was the last. "Can I have a word with you Sasuke?" He'd asked Hinata to wait for him on the schoolyard. For moment it was just the two of them.

Sasuke looked at him and smirked a bit. He came to stand in front of him calm and relaxed. "Sure Naruto, what can I do for you?"

Naruto frowned. "Why did you have Sakura pull such a stupid stunt this morning?"

"I had nothing to do with it." He said unruffled. "You'll have to ask her why she did it."

"Cut the crap." Naruto's voice was low and held just a bit of menace to it. "Sakura is an annoying know it all, but she's not really mean. She would never come up with anything like trying to cover someone with blood. But I think you might, and it's no secret she does anything you tell her to."

Sasuke sighed. "You know Naruto I know you've grown up with danger all around you. It has got you seeing conspiracies everywhere. Any way what's the big deal it was just a prank."

"It was a mean spirited and cruel prank. I don't like it when people try and hurt others."

Sasuke gave him a slow and considering look. "You don't like seeing people hurt?"

Naruto nodded. "That's right."

"Well that's certainly strange given what you *really* are."

Naruto suddenly eyed the boy carefully. "What do you mean by that? What do you think I really am?"

There was a light in Sasuke's eyes. "A demon," he saw that hit. Sasuke saw a sudden panic in Naruto's eyes. "Of a ninja. And a demon of a killer. You have killed at least eight since you came to the academy. And those are just the ones I know about."

*Does he know?* "I only kill when I have to Sasuke."

"Of course, but somehow I get the feeling that it comes more *naturally* for you than anyone else here."

Naruto gave him a *very* cold look. "If you really believe that then you shouldn't try so hard to piss me off."

Iruka exited the classroom to find his two top students staring each other down in the hallway. "Is there something going on boys?"

"I don't know." Sasuke answered merrily. "Are we done here Naruto or was something more you need to get off your chest?"

Naruto shook his head. "No I think I've said what I needed to."

Sasuke smiled and left with a friendly wave of his hand. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

---

Sasuke was walking Sakura home with his arm protectively around her. All her doubts about doing what she did had been assuaged by about five minutes of his talking to her. He smiled at her and it was a rare true smile, for in that moment he found that he liked her more than he ever had. *She's completely mine now. I can trust her to do anything I want. I'll definitely need to arrange for us to end up on the same team.* He suddenly stopped and squeezed her tight. He

whispered in her ear. "I'll never let you go now Sakura, you'll always be with me at my side."

As they started walking again she took a hold of his arm and rested her head on his shoulder. It had all been worth it because now her Sasuke-kun really understood how much she loved him. And no matter what Naruto or Ino-pig or anyone else might think, she would always be with Sasuke-kun. Always.



## The gift

It was October ninth and Naruto was celebrating his twelfth birthday. As he waited for the guests to arrive Naruto ran around the house excitedly, as he always did on his birthdays. Kushina watched him dash about with fondness, but also with a bit of sadness. This would be the last birthday where he would be a child. In a little more than seven months he would graduate from the academy and earn his hitai-ite. He would be an adult legally and in the eyes of the village. In some ways he'd been an adult for sometime now. In other ways he was still a kid. And in one way it didn't matter how old he was, he would *always* be her baby. Without warning she grabbed him and pulled him into an embrace. She happily planted some kisses on his face.

"Mom why are you hugging me?"

"Do I need a reason to hug my baby?"

"Mom," he whined. "I'm twelve now! I'm not a baby!"

"Yes you are! You are *my* baby!" She hugged him some more. "Are you too old to be hugged by your poor mother?"

He smiled at her happily. "No mom, you can always hug me."

"Well thank you son." She laughed and hugged him some more.

---

Kushina looked at the small crowd that had taken over much of the first floor. Given her constant concern for security a part of her couldn't help but worry at so many people within her home. But the larger part of her was pleased that so many of Naruto's classmates had decided to attend. He had invited everyone in his class except for Sasuke and Sakura. And most had come. It really looked and sounded like a normal twelve year olds birthday party. The dining

room had all sorts of food and drink as well as a large birthday cake. In the parlor music was playing and some of the children were dancing, including Naruto and Hinata of course. All of Naruto's friends were here. Shikamaru, Chouji, Kiba, and even Lee who was between missions. There was also Neji and Lee's other teammate, a girl with her hair up in two buns. Hiashi was present and had permitted his other daughter Hanabi to attend. The poor dear was a bit out of place as she was younger than the other children and was used to more formal environments. There was Kakashi trying to ignore Lee's sensei who was challenging him to a variety of contests. Might Guy was certainly friendly enough, if a bit... eccentric. He had gone directly up to Naruto and begun to praise his, 'fires of youth.' Whatever that meant. He then whipped out a *horrendous* lime green spandex leotard which matched the one he was wearing. The man had somehow brain washed Lee into wearing one and was trying to inflict the same on her son. Naruto accepted the gift with a weak smile and promised to, 'try it on' later.

---

Ino danced with a few different boys but spent most of her time eyeing Naruto like a hawk eyeing a plump rabbit. Hinata stayed glued to Naruto's side, guarding him against Ino and the horde of lesser fan girls.

---

Jiraiya was pestering poor Tsunade for a dance. Kushina had warned her against any displays of violence in front of the kids. By the way the vein in Tsunade's forehead was bulging it looked like Jiraiya was seriously pushing his luck.

---

Sarutobi's arrival caused quite a stir. Most of the students had never met him. Once they were over the initial shock and awe they began treating him like a kindly grandfather. A role he was quite happy to fulfill.

---

Kushina frowned at the sight of Mizuki. She had never trusted or liked him. She watched as he approached her son. He put a friendly hand on her son's shoulder and spoke to him for a bit. He soon nodded and began leading his sensei towards the stairs.

"Going somewhere son?"

"Oh mom Mizuki-sensei wants to see our family library. That's o.k. isn't it?"

She lifted an eyebrow and looked at the man. "Looking for anything in particular?"

Mizuki smiled at her. "Not really. But I am a teacher afterall. And I could hardly pass up the opportunity to see the Namikaze library."

She nodded. "Of course just so long as you understand it's a *private* library. You are quite welcome to read anything you like, but we don't allow anything to be removed."

Mizuki nodded happily. "Of course."

---

He looked over the many rows of books. Some of them really were quite interesting. He wouldn't have minded spending a few afternoons here simply reading. But of course that was not the reason he was there. "This really is a fine collection Naruto. It may well be the most comprehensive one in Konoha. You should be very proud."

"Thanks." Naruto smiled and rubbed the back of his head. He really liked Mizuki-sensei. Mizuki was always encouraging and full of praise. When he'd asked for an invitation to his birthday party Naruto had been very flattered.

"You know Naruto I'm curious about something."

"Yes Mizuki-sensei?"

"Well I don't see any jutsu scrolls anywhere."

"Oh, we keep them locked in there." Naruto pointed to a door at the far end of the library. "My mom keeps them locked up, but she'll take out whichever ones I want to study."

"Are you studying something now?" Mizuki asked curious.

Naruto nodded. "I'm studying a few B-rank wind jutsus and one of my dad's original creations, 'Flying Thunder God Technique.'"

Mizuki didn't have to pretend to be impressed. "You're studying *that* jutsu?"

Naruto nodded but looked unhappy. "Yes but it has been *really* slow going."

"Well that's not surprising Naruto it is an extremely advanced A-rank technique. Your father's mastery of it was one of the reasons he was so extraordinary."

"But rasengan's an A-rank technique too and I mastered that in less than a year!"

"You've mastered rasengan?!" Mizuki shook his head. He most definitely did *not* want to have to fight Naruto.

Naruto looked a bit embarrassed. "Oh! That's supposed to be a secret! Please don't tell anyone Mizuki-sensei."

Mizuki smiled down at the boy. "Don't worry Naruto! You can trust me."

---

"Where is your sensei?" Kushina asked when she saw Naruto come down the stairs on his own.

"Oh he wanted to stay and read some of the books." Naruto answered simply.

"Did he now?" Kushina sounded anything but surprised. "And by any chance did he ask where the jutsu scrolls were?"

"Yeah mom, how'd you know?"

She sighed and ruffled her son's hair. "Naruto-kun you're really going to have to work on those blind spots."

"Huh?"

She shook her head. "I'll explain it tomorrow. Tonight just enjoy your party." Her son shrugged and hurried to where Hinata was waiting for him. She meanwhile approached the Hokage.

---

Mizuki hurried knowing time was of the essence. The tiny ten by ten foot room held *hundreds* of jutsu scrolls. He would gladly have traded a year of his life for just one undisturbed hour in this room. Within the room was a small desk with about a dozen scrolls just laying on top. Sure enough these had to be the ones he had used most recently as, 'Flying Thunder God,' was among them. He was taking that one for sure. His luck was in as he found, 'Shadow Clone Technique,' was also on the desk. These two scrolls would please Lord Orochimaru greatly. While he was here he took a couple more just for himself. He carefully concealed them beneath his Chunin vest. Now he just needed to calmly stroll out the front door. Opening the door to the room he stepped quickly out into the library. He was immediately grabbed and slammed down to the floor. His arms were painfully gripped from behind.

"Well I'll give you credit for having guts. Despite being a teacher you don't seem to have much in the way of brains though." Kushina said.

Mizuki looked up to see Kushina and the Hokage frowning down at him. Behind him were a pair of ANBU with a firm grip.

"Why did you do this Mizuki?" The Hokage asked.

Mizuki said nothing as the ANBU swiftly disarmed him and liberated the scrolls he had taken.

The Hokage merely sighed. "Take him to Ibiki, but leave through a side entrance. There is no need to disturb the children with this."

---

Naruto thoroughly enjoyed his twelfth birthday party. He danced the whole time with Hinata, had cake and ice cream, and got to open a small mountain of gifts. He thanked each and every person as he opened their gift. At the end though he noticed that one person he was very close to hadn't given him anything.

"Godmother you didn't get me anything." Naruto pouted.

Tsunade smiled. "Oh but I *do* have a gift for you Naruto."

"Well where is it?"

"I'll give it to you a little later."

"When?"

"Later." She refused to say anything more.

---

The guests enjoyed themselves and many stayed late. It was only as midnight approached that the mansion was nearly empty again. By then only Kushina, Naruto, Hinata, Tsunade, Jiraiya, Kakashi, Shizune, and Sarutobi remained.

Tsunade smiled at Naruto. "Naruto would you like me to give you my present now?"

"Sure." Naruto said happily.

"Actually before I give it to you there's something I want to announce." She looked over to the Hokage. "Would you like to do the honors old man?"

Sarutobi shook his head. "No Tsunade, go ahead by all means."

"Well to make a long story short, a couple months ago the old man asked me to take over for him so he could retire."

"What?!" Jiraiya screeched. "Why *her* ? Why didn't you ask me?!"

Sarutobi sighed. "I asked her because she was one of the legendary Sannin who I knew the Council would accept without dispute."

"So am I!" Jiraiya shouted.

"Yes, but she is not a pornographer." Sarutobi said tiredly.

Jiraiya sniffed. "My novels are not pornography. They are adult themed literature and hugely popular."

"You do know don't you that if you were Hokage you wouldn't be able to go on anymore of your disgusting, 'research' trips anymore." Tsunade said icily.

Jiraiya smirked. "I didn't say I would do it. I just said I should have been asked."

Tsunade shut her eyes. " *Anyway*. The old man asked if I would take over for him and become the Godaime Hokage.

"What did you say lady Tsunade?" Shizune asked excitedly.

Tsunade smiled wryly. "Well despite my better judgment I said yes." Everyone but Sarutobi began to shout and excitedly congratulate her.

"Well I guess you finally got over your negative feelings for the village." Kushina said.

"I did. But I'm not actually doing this for the village."

"You're not?" Kushina said in surprise.

"No." Tsunade said.

Jiraiya smiled. "Are you doing it for the old man?"

"Nope." Tsunade replied.

"Then why are you doing it godmother?" Naruto asked.

Tsunade leaned down to put her face at Naruto eye level. "I did it for you Naruto."

"For me?" He said in a small voice.

She nodded and gently stroked his cheek. "Yes Naruto-kun, for you. Because I love you my godson and I want you to have your dream." Reaching down she pulled out her necklace and displayed the crystal for him. "Do you know what this is?"

Naruto shook his head. "No godmother."

"This is the Shodai's necklace. It was given to me when I was a very little girl by my grandfather the Shodai Hokage. The crystal is unique; there are only two like it in the entire world. With this necklace you could buy a pair of gold mines and the mountains on top of them. But that is not the only thing that makes it special. For you see this necklace also comes with a curse."

"A curse?" Naruto asked, interest definitely rising.

Tsunade nodded. "That's right. Only those who are destined to become Hokage can own it. Twice in my life I gave the necklace to someone that I loved. To my little brother Nawaki and to the man I loved, Dan. They both dreamed of being Hokage and of protecting this village. That was their dream Naruto, as it is your dream now. They both died in battle not long after I gave it to them. Losing them shattered my heart. For a long time I didn't think I would be able to care for anyone ever again." She stopped to compose herself. "But then I got to know you Naruto-kun. I've watched you grow up and



seen just how much you have been ready to sacrifice in order to protect this village. And I've seen how much you love and treasure the people of this village. Even though a great many of them hate you. You've reminded me of just why Dan and Nawaki wanted to be Hokage. In you Naruto-kun I feel their dream still lives." She quickly rubbed her eyes. "Knowing you has healed my heart and allowed me to love again." She reached behind her neck and unclasped the necklace. "After Dan died I swore I would never give this to anyone else. But I've decided that once more, just once more, I will put the odds on you."

"Tsunade you can't! It's too much!" Kushina gasped.

Tsunade looked at her and shook her head. "All this is, is proof of my faith in your son." She turned back to Naruto. "Naruto-kun I accepted the position of Godaime Hokage so I could make sure you would reach your dream one day. Become the good man and great ninja I know you will be and when the time comes I will name you my successor." She placed the necklace around his neck. "Accept from me this necklace and with it my blessing." She leaned forward and kissed his forehead.

Naruto hugged her as hard as he could. "I love you godmother!"

She gladly returned his embrace. "I love you too Naruto." She smiled down at him despite the tears in her eyes. "Happy birthday."

# Graduation

Sarutobi's retirement and Tsunade's replacement of him was announced early in November to general celebration. As Sarutobi had expected the Council approved the nomination without a mummer. On New Year's Day Tsunade became the fifth Hokage. Kushina had graciously agreed to allow her friend to have the job on the side. She and Naruto had both stood there beside her on top of the Tower as all Konoha cheered their new Hokage. As he stood there Naruto had closed his eyes and pretended, for just a moment, that they were all cheering for him.

---

In January it finally happened. Hinata beat Sasuke in a spar and rose to be number two in the class standings. People were also beginning to notice her ability with medical jutsus and talk about her as the next Tsunade. She made a medicinal cream she shared with all her classmates (including Sasuke) which worked wonders on any cuts or bruises. Hinata was coming into her own as a powerful medic nin who was also an excellent combat specialist. People began to say that she would make a perfect partner for Naruto who was also a close combat specialist. Sasuke did not miss the talk.

One evening in January he was at a dinner with his mother Mikoto and his uncle Riyuki. Everyone acknowledged Sasuke as both a genius and heir to the clan. Until he turned 16 though Mikoto was the clan head. Technically she was, but many of the clan members felt she was too kind and too soft to be in charge of the Uchihas. However most did not want to offend Sasuke by removing her. The solution had been to have Fugaku's younger brother help and advise his sister in law. In title Mikoto was clan head, but in fact Riyuki held greater sway and his, 'advice' was usually followed. Sasuke understood the reality and was not bothered by it. He loved his mother dearly, but she was not ninja. She was too kind hearted and too gentle to deal with the harsh realities of ninja and Uchiha life. He would never, ever admit this; but a part of him was jealous that his

mother was not more like Kushina. A woman who was loving and tender to her son and viciously lethal to any who threatened him.

"I need help with something." Sasuke said casually as he, his mother, and his uncle ate.

"What is it dear?" Mikoto asked.

"I would like Uchiha Ichala to begin giving Haruno Sakura lessons in medical jutsus."

"Oh really?" Riyuki frowned and took a sip of tea. "You expect me to just order her to take an apprentice? And one who is not even of Uchiha blood?" Riyuki shook his head. "Such things are not done."

"Son why do you want Sakura to learn medical jutsus? Has she asked you for help?" Mikoto asked.

Sasuke shook his head. "She's not very powerful but she has excellent chakra control. If she's going to be my partner I need her to be as strong and effective as possible. For someone of her abilities being a medic nin is obviously the best choice. Ichala is the only medic nin in our clan. It would help me if she would give Sakura some instruction." Sasuke tried to smile. "She has learned from Tsunade. So if she teaches Sakura it will be a little like she studied under Tsunade, though at second hand."

Riyuki smiled and took another sip of tea. "Which is not nearly as good as learning at first hand as Hyuga Hinata has done." Riyuki saw the tiny flash of feeling in his nephews eyes at the mention of Hinata's name.

"Naruto will end up with her on his team, I'm sure of it. So he will have a powerful medic nin to heal him and help protect him. I want the same kind of support."

"Dear, does Sakura *want* to be a medic nin?" His mother asked.

Sasuke shrugged. "No but once I've talked to her she will." He sounded very sure.

Riyuki sighed. "I will tell Ichala what you ask and leave the decision to her. I will not order her to take on an apprentice."

"Thank you uncle." If she didn't agree Sasuke would talk to her himself, he was sure he could win her over.

Mikoto looked at her son unhappily. "Sasuke, do you love this girl?"

He looked at his mother in surprise. "What?"

"What are your feelings towards this girl?"

"I know I can count on her and that she can help me reach my goals. I think she will make a good partner for me." He said simply.

"So you have no feelings for her at all?"

He shrugged. "I've actually started to like her a bit and I trust her to do as I say."

"But you have no romantic feelings for her whatsoever?" His mother said sadly. "Sasuke I have seen the look in her eyes when she is with you. The girl is in love with you."

"I know." He replied coolly. "That is why I can trust her."

His mother stood up from the table, suddenly no longer hungry. "My son you are becoming like your brother."

He looked at her in outrage as if she had just slapped him. "I'm nothing like him!"

"Are you sure?" Mikoto spoke with rare anger and quickly left the dining room.

Sasuke and Riyuki sat there in silence for a moment. "Don't be upset with your mother Sasuke." Riyuki said quietly. "She is a kind and good woman and she loves you. But she is not ninja and we cannot expect to understand all the truths of ninja life."

Sasuke nodded and decided to let his hurt feelings go. His mother was no Kushina, but he loved her and would not blame her for not understanding.

---

The ANBU captain connected with a hard punch to his opponent's jaw sending him to the ground.

"All right Naruto, how about we call it a day?" Kakashi tried not to sound winded. Wishing for once that Naruto would want to do something other than spar whenever he came over.

"Aw come on niisan." He was quickly back on his feet. "Just one more time, please?"

Kakashi shook his head and pulled off his dog mask. "The last three spars have been, 'just one more time.' Take pity on your big brother. Not all of us have your energy."

"Fine." The two of them began heading back inside. "Niisan will you be getting a team again this year?"

Kakashi looked at him and sighed, he knew where this was going. "I've had one each of the last five so I imagine I'll get one this years too. And before you ask I don't know what the assignments will be."

Naruto gave him a huge smile. "Wouldn't it be great though if you were my sensei?"

Kakashi smiled. "I would like that Naruto. I would like to try and be for you the same sort of teacher and role model your father was for me. Of course you'd have to pass my test first."

"Oh don't worry! Me and my team will definitely pass!" Naruto spoke with total confidence.

"Oh really?" Kakashi smirked. "How can you be so sure when you don't even know who will be on your team?"

"I know all the strengths and weaknesses of all my classmates. Whoever my teammates are I'll lead us to victory!" His smile slipped a bit. "So long as I'm not stuck with that bastard Sasuke."

Kakashi sighed. "You know Naruto, not all the Uchihas come with horns and a tail."

"You've told me about Obito. I've told you about Fugaku, Itachi and Sasuke. So far none of the Uchihas I've met have been heroes." He shrugged. "If I meet one who convinces me otherwise I'll change my opinion. Until then I'm not trusting any of them."

"Guilty until proven innocent eh?"

"Guilty until proven they're *not* all out to kill me." He frowned. "I mean how can you ask me to trust such a deceitful bunch? Fugaku supposedly died while traveling in Bear country and Itachi isn't even listed in the Bingo book as a missing nin. The only reason I know the truth is because my mom is on the Council. Why are the Uchihas allowed to just bury the truth?"

Kakashi shrugged. "They're ninjas and as such understand the power information has. Anyway I'm sure *you* wouldn't begrudge them a few secrets now would you?"

Naruto gave him a sour look. "You know the way you defend them people would think that the clan liked you. Why do you stand up for them when they all try and pretend you don't exist?"

"I owe it to Obito's memory. Besides, it's just a little petty jealousy that a non Uchiha has managed to copy more than a thousand

jutsus. So far as I know none of them have gained even half that many."

"Well whose fault is that?" Naruto sounded down right offended. "They should look to you as an example of what they can accomplish with some hard work. But instead they're just jealous of you."

Kakashi sighed. "Even if some of them are jealous that's not the same as having all of them out to get you."

"I never said they were out to get *you* Kakashi niisan." He shook his head. "Let's stop talking about the Uchiha clan. It's leaving a bad taste in my mouth."

---

Sakura was staring up at a frowning dark haired woman wearing a Chunin vest. "So you are Sakura?"

"Hai." She said in a small voice.

The woman's frown deepened. "I can tell just by looking at you that you're weak." She reached out and actually took a hold of one of her arms. "No muscle tone at all! How do you expect to survive on the battle field? With looks and wit? Do you think some Sand nin will decide not to lop off that pretty little head of yours because he thinks you're cute?"

She began to feel very scared. "Uhm, no."

"No what?!" The woman said angrily.

"No sensei!"

The woman nodded slightly mollified. But the frown hadn't left; Sakura was beginning to wonder if it ever would. "My name is Uchiha Ichala and from this point on you will address me as Ichala-sensei, do you understand me cherry blossom girl?"

"Yes Ichala-sensei!"

She nodded. "Let me explain something to you right off the bat. I... don't... like... you." Each word was punctuated by a finger poking into her huge forehead. "I never wanted an apprentice, and if I ever had I'd have looked for a student from my own clan. I agreed to take on this burden as a favor to Sasuke. As such I really don't care about your feelings or whether or not you hate me. In fact I can pretty much guarantee that you're going to hate me. But if you do what I say you will become a strong and capable kunoichi and medic nin. Maybe you'll even live long enough to be of some help to Sasuke. From now on whenever I am in Konoha you will come here after class for three hours of physical and medical training. I won't just be teaching you jutsus. It's obvious you need to build up your physical strength and chakra capacity as well. I also wouldn't be shocked if your taijutsu was mediocre. For at least the next couple years I will be training you."

"Years?" Sakura said weakly.

Ichala leaned her face down into Sakura's. "What was that?!"

"I mean, uhm, years sensei!" Sakura answered in a panic.

"That's right! I expect to have the joy of your company cherry blossom for at least the next couple of years."

"But Ichala-sensei I will be graduating come May!"

"I know that." Ichala's tone was icy and her look clearly said she thought Sakura an idiot. "Even after you have been placed on a Genin team I will expect you to still come here for additional training. Now let's start building up some stamina into that weak body of yours with ten laps around the Uchiha compound! Run maggot!"

Sakura ran and Ichala stayed right behind screaming at her to run harder. Sakura tried not to cry and reminded herself that this was so she could be stronger and better help Sasuke.



---

The last semester passed quickly. Hinata solidified her position as number two within her class. About halfway through she finally managed to finish a full ten hour work out. This in turn made Kiba even more determined to work hard. He eventually got up to eight hours. Near the end of the semester Sakura began to noticeably improve her taijutsu and stamina. She even demonstrated a couple basic medical jutsus, though her skill did not compare to Hinata's. Before they knew it the last official day of class began. One by one they were given the exam. They all passed of course. The exam was really just a formality. Only a very weak ninja would fail it.

Iruka stood proudly looking at thirty smiling faces. All of them had put on their new hitai-ites. "When we began four long years ago there were fifty of you. Now thirty of you remain. I have no doubt that each and every one of you will go on to have a fine career and make Konoha and your families proud. I want you all to know that I am proud of all of you who have endured and reached this day. I am honored to call myself your sensei and want you all to know that should you ever need advice or help my door is always open. You are all ninjas now and you are all adults. But as ninjas you are the lowest of the low. Please keep in mind that as such you will need to continue to work hard and pay attention to your new sensei. Please report back here tomorrow to be assigned to your new teams and to your senseis. Oh and just one more thing." With a smile he began to walk up the steps between the desks. All the students looked at him wondering what was going on. He approached Shikamaru who was taking his usual nap. With a grin Iruka leaned down and put his mouth right next to the boy's ear. "SHIKAMARU!!

"Gah!" The boy shouted and dropped out of his seat. The entire class burst into laughter.

---

"Man what a drag, I can't believe Iruka-sensei pulled such a lame stunt."

Kiba laughed. "Hah! I can't believe I never thought of it."

"You know Shika whoever your sensei is he won't let you get away with doing nothing all the time." Naruto said. "You're going to actually have to put in some effort."

"Don't remind me." Shikamaru grumbled.

"Shikamaru-kun I am sure whoever your sensei is that things will be all right." Hinata said with certainty.

As they approached the door Ino and some of her posse got in front of it to block them and the entire class from exiting. "Hey everyone! I'm announcing a graduation party at my house tonight! All of you are welcome! There'll be food, drink, music, and fun!" She smiled at Naruto. "Will you come Naruto-kun?"

He looked to Hinata. "Want to go Hinata-chan?"

She nodded. "Sure Naruto-kun, Ino's parties are always fun."

"Count us in then." Naruto said with a smile.

"Great! I'll see you all there." She smiled brightly and led the class out.

---

"I am very proud of you Naruto-kun." She hugged her son tight. "From this day forward you are a Leaf ninja and an adult." She tightened her hug a bit. "But please never forget that you will also always be my little Naruto-kun."

He smiled. "I understand mom, but please don't call that except when we're alone."

"No promises." She laughed at his unhappy expression. "Now I have a graduation gift for you."

"Is it a katana?" He asked eagerly.

She smiled. "Yes."

"What?!" He leapt about two feet into the air.

Kushina opened a cabinet and produced a sword in its scabbard. She held it out to him. "Congratulations my son. You are now shinobi and ready to carry a katana with you."

"Thanks mom!" He enthusiastically took the sword from her and pulled it out to get a look at it. He smiled. It was perfect! It was exactly like hers. That small curve in the blade, the way the metal just shined, and those perfect razor sharp edges!

"Now remember son, a katana is not just a weapon it is a part of you. You must name it and give it just a little bit of your soul."

"I know mom!" He was so excited. Something suddenly occurred to him. "Hey mom you know I never asked you. What do you call yours?"

She smiled and took her sword out. "I call mine Homeward. I always believed that no matter how much trouble I was in it would always help me find my way home again. Have you chosen a name for yours?"

He nodded and placed his left hand over the blade. "You are Defender, because you will help be to defend and protect all the people of this village." He let the sword cut into his palm. "Taste of me and know me, for you are part of me now."

Kushina nodded, proud and sad at the same time. "Well son I have to go somewhere but I'll be back before you leave for your party."

"Where are you going?"

"Oh, I just have to take care of a little something."

---

Ino rubbed her hands together eagerly. "This is the night! Tonight I'm getting Naruto's very first kiss!"

"Oh give it up Ino!" Sakura said. "I mean the way those two are he must have already kissed her." Sakura said.

"Nope!" Ino replied with conviction. "Hinata admitted over lunch that they've never kissed.

"But even if that's true what makes you think tonight will be any different?" Dellona asked. "I mean you've had four years and nothing! What makes you think tonight will be special?"

Ino grinned. "I have a secret weapon! My folks just got in some of these." Excitedly she pulled out a small jar with a flower with white and red leaves.

"Oh! Is that a Vermala?" Sakura asked.

Ino nodded happily. "It sure is! The red leaves symbolize love and the white ones mean purity. This flower is a symbol of pure love!"

"And any girl can kiss any boy who stands underneath one!" Dellona said.

"Exactly!" Ino cooed. "All I have to do is get him to stand underneath it and he'll have to kiss me. And I just know once he kisses me he'll realize how much he loves me."

Sakura looked at the little plant and wondered if there was any way she could maneuver Sasuke underneath it. "There's one small problem with your plan though. Do you really think Hinata is just going to stand there and let you kiss him?"

Ino's grin turned evil. "Well that's where you girls come in. Let me explain my plan and how we can make operation, 'get Naruto's first kiss' a success. To begin with..."

---

Iruka sighed. He should have known that this is what it would be about. He had actually thought that when the Hokage summoned

him to her office it might have been to discuss a new assignment. But no, it was all about...

"Now I want to assure you Iruka that this has nothing to do with the team assignments." The Hokage said to him with a smile. "You are after all the instructor and that decision is fully in your hands. I would *never* order you to do something you did not wish to." She assured him.

"However we are a bit curious as to where you will be placing our children." Kushina said in a light tone.

"Indeed," Hiashi said.

"Well my intention was to place Naruto on a team with Dellona and Kiba." He frowned a bit. "By all rights Shikamaru should be on that team as he was the weakest student and Naruto the best. But the heads of the Nara, Yamanka, and Akimichi clans were all insistent that their children serve on the same squad. Hinata will be on a squad with Lorum and Ronto."

"I see." Tsunade said flatly.

"Interesting choices." Hiashi said neutrally.

Kushina nodded. "Yes very interesting. Have you considered however that given Naruto and Hinata's lifelong friendship and special relationship that they might excel were they allowed to work together?"

"Indeed." Hiashi said. "Hinata has grown strong since working beside Naruto. I see no reason to believe she would not continue to do so for as long as they were partnered."

"I recognize how strong their bond is." Iruka stated. "But given that Hinata is second in the class I thought she should be on a separate team. Putting her on a squad with Naruto would overbalance them."

Kushina smiled. "Too much of a good thing huh?"

"Well I certainly find no fault with your logic Iruka." The Hokage spoke with a polite and pleasant tone. "But I think you will agree that there are times when exceptions should be made."

"Were you willing to see your way clear in this case the Hyuga clan would be in your debt." Hiashi said plainly.

"Namikaze already considers you a friend." Kushina said cheerfully. "If you could just grant us this tiny favor we would consider you an even better friend!"

*Well they're at least polite about it, which is better than the Uchiha clan. And they aren't as annoying begging like the Nara, Yamanaka, and Akimichi.* Like most times in Konoha the clans held the real power. Iruka supposed he should be glad he was at least allowed to do as he saw fit with most of the students. "I understand." He said simply and nodded.

"Wonderful!" Tsunade said.

"I thank you." Hiashi said

"Great!" Kushina replied. "Oh, and by the way we'd like Kakashi to be their sensei."

Iruka sighed and nodded. He decided not to bother telling them Kakashi was always slated to be Naruto's sensei.

# First kiss

**Author's Note:** To begin with this story has received over **60,000** hits over **550** reviews, and over **500** alerts and fav. stories. The response has been completely amazing and I really appreciate it. Now for any of you who may not have heard, the latest Naruto manga has an image of **Kushina** as well as some other major events which I won't mention as I don't want to spoil anything. Though we learn who Naruto was named for. One other thing. I've had it brought to my attention by a few reviewers that Mikoto was actually a Jonin. Sorry, my mistake as I failed to research enough. *However* as this story has now established her as *not* being ninja that is how her character will stay. Which actually works best with what I have in mind for later. I hope everyone continues to enjoy the story.

---

"Welcome I'm so happy you could make it!" Ino greeted them at the door.

"Thanks for inviting us." Naruto said.

"Yes thank you Ino." Hinata said.

"Come on in and make yourselves at home! My parents are at the Nara's so we're unsupervised!" Ino told them happily.

"You mean there are no adults here?" Naruto said surprised.

Ino laughed and tapped her hitai-ite. "What are you talking about Naruto-kun? The place is *packed* with adults!"

Naruto chuckled. "I guess you've got a point there Ino." He and Hinata had both been there before for birthday and end of semester parties. They moved to the living room where the music was playing. At the entrance they noticed that the dancers were steering clear of

one corner of the room. Hinata was the first to spot a small plant in a pot hanging from the ceiling on some wires.

"Oh!" Hinata said in surprise.

"What?" Naruto asked.

"Oh well Ino has put a Vermala in the corner there." Hinata pointed.

Naruto needed a minute to think. "Oh, is that the kissing flower? The one where if you're underneath it you have to give a kiss?"

"Yes." She couldn't help it she was blushing. *I wonder if I tripped him while we were dancing if he would stumble far enough.* She immediately felt guilty for thinking of something so underhanded. But she still tried to figure out if there was any way she could get him over to that corner. *Do I really want him to kiss me even if it's just because of a silly tradition?* She thought about it honestly for a moment. *Hell yes I do!*

Naruto smiled at her. "I guess we better stay clear of that corner then huh?"

"Oh, uhm, yes of course." She gave him a weak smile.

He frowned a bit and put a hand on her forehead. "Are you all right Hinata-chan? You look kind of flushed."

She nodded quickly. "I'm fine Naruto-kun. Let's dance."

As Hinata and Naruto entered the dance floor Ino watched carefully from the edge of the room. She leaned against the wall and simply waited for her moment of opportunity. Tonight she was the wolf, and she'd be damned if she'd leave *this* hunt without her prize.

---

Most people would never guess that Ino had patience. Of course these people had never been shopping with her. She was often loud



and brash and always pushy. But when the situation called for it she knew how to bide her time. Like a shopper searching for the perfect pair of shoes or the best bargain she understood that opportunity came to those who were willing to wait and pounce when the moment came. She was also someone who believed in research. She went through the weekend paper looking for sales and tried to go into a shopping trip as prepared as possible. Now she'd had four long years to scout out her prey. She knew the habits of both her prey and her prey's protector quite well. She'd thought everything out carefully. The food and punch were in the kitchen around the hall, out of sight of the living room. Three of her girls would be in position all night. They had worked out the shifts so that someone was always there. She made sure that at all times she had a cup full of punch in her hand. The opportunity would come and whenever it did she would take advantage of it. Her plan would probably not buy her more than a minute or two at the most, but that would be enough. She smiled as she watched Naruto and Hinata dance as gracefully as they always did. *You are mine Naruto-kun. Tonight I make you mine.*

---

Normally Sakura would have been thrilled just to be on the dance floor with him. At first he'd refused to dance with her. But slowly he had warmed up and whenever they went to parties they would spend most of the night on the dance floor. Usually that was plenty to make her happy. But tonight she was frustrated and about ready to start pulling her hair out. No matter how she tried to subtly drive him towards the corner they never went past the middle of the room. Actually no one had. Supposedly quite a few of the girls had boyfriends and most of them claimed to have kissed. Well perhaps they had, but so far no one had shown the guts to kiss in public, even when though the Vermala provided a perfect excuse.

Sasuke smirked at her. "It's not happening Sakura so stop trying so hard."

A flush of guilt colored her cheeks. "What are you talking about?"

He shook his head and gave her an impish little grin. "We're not going to make out under that plant so stop trying to lead me there."

"I don't know what you mean." Her blush got darker.

"Sure you don't."

The frustration just boiled over. "Sasuke-kun don't you *want* to kiss me?"

He gave her a smile that made her knees weak. "Of course I do Sakura-chan and one day I will. But not yet."

"But why not?"

"Because when I do kiss you Sakura it will mean I am ready to give you all of my heart. I am not ready yet, but if you stay and fight by my side I know I will be one day."

Sakura stared at him. His answer was very romantic and a part of her was thrilled to hear him say such serious and deep words to her. But another part of her wanted to scream at him, 'it's just a kiss not a marriage proposal!' In the end she decided to just keep dancing with him. She would stay by his side and just hope that the day he was talking about wasn't too far off.

---

The song they were listening to came to an end and in the short interval before the next one started Hinata looked up at him. "I'm thirsty Naruto-kun do want some punch?"

He nodded. "Sure Hinata-chan."

"I'll be right back." She headed for the kitchen and the punch bowl.

As Hinata walked past her Ino put the plastic cup to her lips to hide a predatory smile. *Now!* With ease she began to approach Naruto from his blindside while holding out the cup.

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Dellona saw Hinata and felt just a little panic at what she was supposed to do. She took a deep breath and calmed her self. Ino was counting her. "Ow!" She clutched to her stomach and collapsed onto the kitchen floor.

Hinata instantly put down her cup to kneel over her classmate. The other people in the kitchen quickly gathered all around them. "What's wrong Dellona?"

"Oh! My stomach it hurts!"

"Just lie back and relax I'll perform a jutsu to check your vitals." Hinata performed a few hand signs and placed her hand on the girl's stomach.

---

"Naruto-kun." She called out to him. As he turned around she deliberately ran into him by, 'accident' and spilled punch all over her dress.

Naruto saw the punch spill all over Ino. "Oh I'm sorry Ino! I didn't see you there!"

She stared at him and looked furious. "Naruto! You've just ruined a brand new dress! I bought this just for the party tonight and now look at it! The stain will never come out!" She stepped into his face and with righteous fury stuck a finger to his chest.

Naruto had never had the infamous Ino fury directed towards him and he did what any sane person would do, he retreated. He held up his hands defensively and gave ground before her anger. "Ino I apologize I'll pay for the dress!"

"Oh is that what you think!" She continued to poke him and push him ahead of her. "You think you can just buy me off?"

"Yes... I mean no!" Everyone stopped dancing and turned their attention towards them

"Well let me tell you something Naruto." She came to a halt. And then her anger seemed to disappear like smoke on the wind. "I finally got where I want you." Ino was suddenly smiling.

"Huh?" He was confused not just by her sudden change in mood but by the fact everyone was suddenly laughing and pointing.

Shikamaru shook his head. "Naruto." He called.

"Yeah Shika?"

Shikamaru smirked and pointed to a spot above his head. "You just got checkmated."

Naruto looked up and sure enough he was standing directly underneath the Vermala. *Ah hell I got ambushed!*

Ino put her hands on both his shoulders and leaned in towards him. "It's the rules Naruto-kun; you have to kiss me now. Or do you want to break tradition and get bad karma?" Immediately the girls began crying out for Ino to kiss him. He knew Hinata-chan would be upset with him for this but he just stood there and let Ino draw her lips to his.

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Hinata frowned at the girl. "Dellona there's nothing physically wrong with you. Where is the pain exactly?"

"Uhm right here." She put a hand on her stomach.

Hinata continued to frown as she didn't know what the problem could be. As she knelt there in the kitchen she heard a commotion come from the living room. And she heard Sakura call as clear as day. "Kiss him Ino!"

Everything snapped into place instantly. She *knew* who Ino wanted to kiss. She jumped to her feet and rushed back to the living room. There from the entry way she spotted Ino with her hands on Naruto-kun leaning in towards him. Something inside her snapped and she acted without conscious thought. Shoving people out of her way she hurried over to them. Grabbing Ino by her blonde ponytail Hinata yanked her back so hard she was thrown down to the living room floor.

"Ow!" Ino cried out and rubbed the back of her head. She looked up to see a furious Hinata standing between her and a shocked Naruto. "What's wrong with you?"

She stood protectively in front of Naruto and glared down at the blonde. "Don't ever do that again Ino!! No one kisses Naruto-kun but me!" She *screamed* at the girl. Everyone stared at Hinata in shock.

"Hinata-chan?" his voice called quietly from behind.

She turned around to see him looking at her in shock. Her sudden moment of anger was gone and she was abruptly aware of what she had just said in front of her classmates and in front of him. And as she stood there with all their eyes on her she realized it was a decisive moment in her life. She suddenly remembered the words Kushina had said four years ago. *Can you pledge everything to be with him? Can you offer your life, your heart, and your very soul to stand beside him? Do you love him that much?* Looking into Naruto's surprised face she asked herself if she really loved him that much. And she found her answer.

"Yes I do." She whispered.

"Huh?" Naruto had been the only one to hear her.

She looked into his blue eyes and felt that courage she always did when she was near him. She felt the courage to follow her heart.

"Yes I do." She spoke loudly and clearly for all to hear. "I do love you

that much Naruto-kun." She swiftly leaned forward put her arms around his neck and kissed his lips.

The entire crowd was stunned. And then they began to cheer and whistle at the long and intense kiss. Hinata heard them but didn't care. She slowly opened her eyes and pulled back from him. Naruto was just staring at her. He didn't seem able to say a word or make any sound at all. She didn't know what to say or do and everyone was loudly cheering for her to kiss him again. Suddenly confused and embarrassed she ran away and got out of that house.

---

She was just sitting on a roof top about ten blocks away. She was trying to understand how things had gotten so out of hand in less than a minute. She had kissed him and declared her love for him publicly, there was no going back now. When she heard someone land nearby she knew who it was.

"Hello Naruto-kun." She didn't bother to turn around.

"Do you mind if I sit with you Hinata-chan?"

She shook her head. "Of course not Naruto-kun."

He approached her with both hands behind his back and sat down on the roof's edge next to her. "Hinata-chan I just want..."

"Wait!" she turned to him desperate. "Naruto-kun can I talk first? There is something I really need to tell you and I'm afraid that if I wait I'll lose my nerve."

"Uhm, all right Hinata-chan."

She looked into his eyes and gathered her courage to do what she needed to. "Naruto-kun I love you. I have always loved you. I can't remember a time in my life when I didn't. And I don't mean that I love you like a friend. It started like that but my feelings grew and intensified. I love you with my entire heart Naruto-kun and I would

give everything just to be with you. I know that you don't see me as a girlfriend or even a potential girlfriend, but that's all right. Because I'll wait and try to bring your heart to where mine is now. All I want is to be with you Naruto-kun. And if we can only be together as friends for now I'll accept that, but know that my love for you is real and will never change." She stopped. He was just looking at her in amazement. "I'm done now. That was everything I wanted to say." He continued to stare at her for awhile. "Naruto-kun please say something!"

He smiled. "I love you too Hinata-chan. I was just wondering what I had ever done to deserve you."

"You mean you love me as a friend right?"

Still smiling he brought a hand out from behind his back. "Nope, not like a friend Hinata-chan." He was holding the Vermala in his hand and held it up over her head. "I'm sorry I didn't realize it sooner but when you kissed me it sort of came clear. I love you Hinata-chan, and I always want you to be with me."

"Really?" She replied in a small voice.

"Really." He began to lean forward when she suddenly put her little hand in front of his face.

"Wait." She reached up to take the Vermala from him and put it on the roof.

"Don't you *want* to kiss me Hinata-chan?" He said in a hurt voice.

"Yes Naruto-kun I do." She leaned in and put her arms around him. "From now on all of my kisses are yours and you can have them whenever you want. I just want you to know it's because I love you and not because of a flower or a tradition." With that the two of them slowly leaned in and began to gently press their lips together underneath the stars.

---

After dropping off Hinata Kushina and her son walked up to their front door.

"You know don't you mom." Naruto wasn't asking a question.

In reply Kushina smiled at him. Protective surveillance was a wonderful thing. "She is going to make you a wonderful wife some day." She sighed happily.



## Bell test

As they headed to the academy for their assignments Hinata and Naruto walked hand in hand like always. But when Hinata looked over at him she was looking at her boyfriend. "Naruto-kun what will we do if we aren't on the same team?" She asked plaintively.

He smiled at her and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "It'll be all right Hinata-chan."

"But I don't want to be away from you Naruto-kun! Now that we're finally boyfriend and girlfriend I don't want us to be apart!" She felt panicked at the thought of being away from him. He was her courage and over the last four years they had been together nearly every single day. Now she was facing the very real possibility of having to go days or even weeks without seeing him. She didn't know if she could bear that.

Naruto stopped and pulled her into a comforting hug. "It'll be o.k. Hinata-chan, whatever happens we will still see each other, even if it's not as often as we want. Even if we are apart I know how strong you are and I know you'll do great."

"Thank you Naruto-kun." She was still worried but felt a bit better.

Kushina walked behind them and didn't say a word. It was not a bad thing for them to go into situations considering the possibilities and the worst case scenario."

---

As Iruka came out with his clipboard the two of them held hands and whispered silent prayers that Kami, or Iruka-sensei, would be kind.

"Well I know you're all very anxious to find out your team assignments and I won't keep you in suspense any longer. Team one will have..."

With each team announcement they held their breaths and waited. As Iruka read off team after team the tension built until finally...

"Team seven will have Namikaze Naruto," Naruto sat bolt up right and looked at Hinata fearfully. "Inuzuka Kiba, and," Naruto and Hinata both leaned forward begging and pleading to hear... "Hyuga Hinata."

"Yatah!" Naruto jumped into the air and pumped a fist over his head.

"Yes!" Hinata cried out.

"All right!" Kiba shouted.

"Noooo!" Ino wailed in despair.

Iruka shook his head. "All right everyone now settle down. Team seven your Jonin sensei is Hatake Kakashi."

"Great!" He looked to Hinata who was beside him and Kiba who was one row behind him. "This is going to be awesome! We get to have my niisan as sensei!"

"Naruto," Iruka called out. "If you don't mind I'm not done yet."

"Oops sorry Iruka-sensei." He quieted down but shared wide smiles with his new squad mates.

"As I was saying," Iruka continued. "Team eight will have Uchiha Sasuke, Haruno Sakura, and Aburame Shino. Your Jonin sensei will be Yuhi Kurenai."

"Yes!" Sakura shouted.

Sasuke grinned and looked over to her. "I told you that fate would be kind if you truly devoted yourself to me."

Iruka frowned to see how Sakura was carrying on about how lucky she was to be on the same team with Sasuke. Obviously Sasuke

had failed to mention that it was the Uchiha clan and not fate that had brought them together. He was tempted to tell Sakura the truth then and there. But that would only upset the Uchihas and not accomplish anything. So he simply finished up the remaining team assignments.

"No, no, no," Ino began slamming her head against her desk. "What evil did I ever do to deserve being stuck on a team with the lazy idiot and human vacuum cleaner?"

Shikamaru lifted his head a few inches off his desk. "How much time have you got?"

Not being in a good mood Ino immediately attacked him mercilessly. "Iruka sighed. "All right you are all dismissed for lunch when you come back you will meet your senseis." He hurried up the steps to keep one member of team ten from killing another.

Team seven soon was together outside the main entrance. "This is going to be so great!" Naruto said excitedly. "We are definitely going to be the most awesome squad around!"

Akamaru barked excitedly. "Yeah! The three of us are definitely going to kick some major ass!" Kiba said excitedly.

Hinata was standing beside Naruto smiling happily. "I am sure we will make a great team."

"So let's go get some lunch, my treat!"

"Where do you want to go?" Kiba asked.

"I've heard of this ramen place called Ichiraku's that's supposed to be really good. I've been dying to try it."

"Sounds good." Kiba said.

"Uhm Naruto-kun aren't you forgetting something?" Hinata spoke up.

"What Hinata-chan?"

"Well aren't you going to contact your mother to escort us?"

"Actually I wasn't planning on it." Naruto said. "We're ninjas now. The three of us are a Genin squad who will be doing real missions soon. I think we can be trusted to survive a lunch at a restaurant."

"But..."

"Come on Hinata, Naruto has a point." Kiba said. "Do you really think we can't just go there and come back without Kushina to watch out for us?"

"Well I suppose not." Hinata admitted.

Naruto had a huge smile. "Well let's go then team seven."

---

Sasuke approached his new teammate with Sakura at his side. "Shino, I know we don't really know each other very well. How about we all have lunch together? It'll be my treat. As teammates now we should really get to know one another."

"Yes Shino please join us!" Sakura added.

Shino nodded once. "Very well."

As they headed off to eat Sasuke wasn't *too* upset at the choice of his squad's third member. Shino's abilities put him somewhere in the top third of the class. His personality was such that Sasuke didn't see him as fighting for leadership of the group the way say Kiba might have. Sasuke nodded to himself, there was potential here.

---

They had a good meal. Naruto thought the ramen was very good (though not as good as his mom's) and the cook and waitress were very friendly. They made it back to the academy on time and

watched as the other senseis picked up their squads. Ino left with a longing look at Naruto. Hinata activated her byakugan so she could more effectively glare at the girl. Once all the other teams had cleared out Naruto stood up and cheerfully went up to the blackboard. With some chalk he wrote out. 'Niisan see you at the house.'

"All right let's go." He said once he'd written his message.

"Go where?" Kiba asked.

"We can go back to my home and start planning for the test."

"What test?"

Naruto shrugged. "Before we become Genin we have to pass a test from our instructor. Each sensei gives their squad a test to see if they're really ready to be ninja."

"What?! But what about the graduation test we took yesterday?" Kiba was clearly upset at the news.

"Oh, well that was just to make sure we were at least competent. I mean come on, three bushins? What sort of idiot can't do that?"

Hinata giggled. "Naruto-kun, *you* can't make three bushins."

He pouted at her. "But I can make shadow clones that are *way* cooler!"

"So what is this test going to be?" Kiba asked.

Naruto shrugged. "There's no standard test. Each sensei gives their squad some sort of challenge or task to accomplish to test their abilities."

"O.k. then, what sort of test does Kakashi give?" Kiba asked.

Naruto looked embarrassed and rubbed the back of his head. "Uhm, I don't know."

"What?!" Kiba was on his feet glaring at Naruto. "What do you mean you don't know? The whole lunch it was, my niisan this and my niissan that. How can you not know what kind of test gives?"

"Well," Naruto admitted to his chagrin. "He never actually told me and I never thought to ask."

"Great! Some ninja spy you turn out to be."

Naruto shrugged. "Well there are a couple things I can tell you about the test though."

"Like what?" Kiba grumbled.

Naruto smiled. "Well to begin with this test has a 66 percent failure rate. Of the ten squads that were formed today no more than three are likely to actually pass and become Genin."

"Naruto-kun," Hinata asked nervously. "What happens if we fail?"

He frowned and shook his head. "A fate far worse than death. If you fail you get sent back *here* for further instruction."

"Oh no!" Kiba whined and Hinata looked worried.

"Hey come on!" Naruto said cheerfully. "There is no way that *this* squad could possibly fail! The three of us will definitely do great!" He saw that his confidence cheered his teammates a little.

"Uhm, Naruto-kun?"

"Yes Hinata-chan?"

"You said there were two things you could tell us. What's the other one?"

He sighed. "Well niisan has been assigned a squad each of the last five years. He's never passed one."

"You mean they *all* failed his test?" Kiba said.

"Yeah."

"Great, just great." Kiba muttered.

Naruto shrugged "All the more reason for us to start planning now. Come on let's get going."

"But Naruto-kun won't sensei get mad if we just leave?" Hinata worried.

He sighed. "Hinata-chan I love my niisan and there are many wonderful things about him. But punctuality is definitely *not* one of them. He is always at least two hours late to everything but missions." Naruto gave a pout. "He was even late to my birthday parties! So do you really want to spend two hours just sitting here or would you rather be at my home eating cookies and coming up with ideas for the test?"

Team seven soon got going.

---

"Naruto-kun why didn't you call me to escort you?" Kushina asked her son with a severe look.

He looked up at her and took on a firm visage. "Mom I'm a ninja of the Leaf now. I think it's safe for me to go about the village without an escort."

Kushina looked a bit scared. "Son do you remember what happened the last time you weren't escorted?"

Naruto nodded. "I remember mom. But I'm not an academy student anymore. I'm a ninja and I have a hitai-ite and a katana that *you*

gave me. If I'm not ready to go around without an escort when will I be?"

"Naruto-kun you know you are a special case!"

He nodded. "I know that mom. But before long I'll be leaving the village to go on real missions in other countries. I'm trusted to not only survive but to help my teammates and accomplish the mission goals. If I'm expected to do that how can you not expect me to be able to walk the streets of my own village?"

"But Naruto..."

"Mom there's always going to be danger, but I really am ready now. *Please* trust in me."

And suddenly she was weeping and holding him tight. "Oh my little baby! Oh my little Naruto-kun!"

"Mom please don't cry! It's all right I swear! I'll keep my radio with me and you know if anything ever happens I'll call you."

"I know that Naruto-kun I do." She slowly let go of him and wiped her eyes. "It's just hard for a mother to let go." She gave him a little smile. "But you really are an adult now and you're becoming a man. All right Naruto-kun no more escorting you but promise me you *will* call me if anything happens."

"I promise mom."

---

A little over two hours later as team seven was sitting around the kitchen having cookies, going over contingencies, and making plans Kakashi walked in. They quickly covered up the notes they'd been making and stood up.

"Hey niisan want some cookies?"



Kakashi shook his head and chuckled. "You know Naruto it's been quite awhile since I've been stood up."

Naruto shrugged. "If you were going to be on time we'd have waited."

"Well I would have been on time but there was this little old lady who needed to cross several streets you see."

Hinata chuckled, Kiba stared at him, and Naruto frowned. "Kakashi niisan why do you bother lying when it's obvious you're lying?"

Underneath his mask Kakashi smiled. "Because when I do tell you a believable lie it'll be harder for you to spot it." He looked over the three of them. "Well now I've met you all before but let's start out with some introductions anyway, just to break the ice."

"Uhm, will you go first Kakashi-sensei and show us what you mean?" Hinata asked.

"Sure," he answered cheerfully. "My name is Hatake Kakashi. I have lots of likes and dislikes. My goals really aren't any of your concern."

"What was that?" Kiba complained. "The only thing we found out was your name!"

"Yes." He smiled beneath his mask. "Why don't you go next?"

"Fine, my name is Inuzuka Kiba. What I like best in this whole world is my dog Akamaru." The small dog on his head immediately began to bark. "I also really like being a part of this new pack. I hate cats and any food I can't chew. My goal is to be a great ninja and help my pack succeed."

"All right, good, now how about the little lady?"

She felt completely comfortable and confident. "I am Hyuga Hinata. I like healing people, pressing flowers, and being with Naruto-kun. I dislike bullies and people who hate others for no reason. I have two

goals. I want to be a great medic nin like Tsunade." She looked over at Naruto and smiled at him. "I also want to be the wife of the Rokudaime Hokage."

"Wife?" Naruto said a bit nervously.

Kiba began laughing. "Hey Naruto you better be serious about becoming Hokage or you're going to lose your girl!"

Kakashi couldn't help but laugh seeing Naruto's distress. "And now you."

"I'm not telling you my name since you already know it. I like my mom, Hinata-chan, and my annoying older brother." Kakashi smiled. "I dislike bullies, assassins, and arrogant bastards who think they're superior because of a stupid blood line. I have only one goal in life. That is to be the greatest Hokage ever."

Kakashi nodded. "Well, I can honestly say I look forward to being sensei to such an interesting bunch. *If* you can pass my test. Otherwise you'll be going back to the academy." He sat back and waited for the explosion. Whenever he mentioned a test they always went crazy. But to his disappointment the three of them just calmly stared at him.

"Naruto-kun has already told us about the test." Hinata said.

"Yeah he also said you would try to psyche us out by telling us about the sixty six percent failure rate and the fact you've failed all five teams you've had." Kiba said.

Naruto suddenly slammed both hands down on the table and glared at his older brother. "I say bring it on!" Naruto shouted. "We don't care about the odds or about other teams! Me, Hinata-chan, and Kiba-kun are going to be a *great* team! Whatever the test is we're passing it no matter what!"

Kiba suddenly slammed his hands down as well. "Damn straight! This team is the best! There's no way the three of us can lose!" Akamaru barked loudly showing his support.

Hinata nodded. "I agree with Naruto-kun and Kiba-kun. We will pass your test."

Kakashi was amazed to find himself facing such a strong united front. Naruto and Kiba were glaring at him and Hinata was looking at him calmly but with determination. They were all unified against him. *They already get it. They already understand about teamwork. Maybe I should just pass them right now.* He thought about it and chuckled. *Nah.* "Well I'm glad to hear such enthusiasm. We'll just have to see how much enthusiasm you have after the test." He reached into a pocket and pulled out three sheets of paper handing them out. "Meet me at training ground seven tomorrow at eight a.m. and don't have any breakfast."

"Why not?" Naruto asked suspiciously.

Kakashi smiled. "Because if you do you'll end up throwing up." He began to leave. "I'll see you tomorrow kids."

Once he was gone Naruto looked at his two teammates. "All right, let's meet here tomorrow at seven thirty. We'll have a big team breakfast and go over a few things. We'll get to the training ground by nine thirty."

"But Naruto-kun Kakashi-sensei said we had to be there by eight and not to have breakfast."

He sighed. "I know what he said Hinata-chan. But I *know* him. He won't be there before ten trust me. And if he was really worried about us throwing up he have told us we needed a really big breakfast."

"Great so we can't trust our sensei?" Kiba asked.

"Once we pass this test we'll be able to trust him. But right now his mission is to try and weed us out." He pulled his notes back out. "Let's keep working. Anyone familiar with training ground seven?"

"I've been there a couple times." Kiba spoke. "It's heavily forested with lots of underbrush."

Naruto frowned. "I'll bet whatever he has in mind will involve ambushes." He chuckled nastily. "Too bad for him our squad has the byakugan and an Inuzuka's sense of smell. Now what I think we need to work on next..."

They stayed until the early evening coming up with scenarios and possibilities and imagining possible replies. Naruto did everything he could think of to get his team ready.

---

At ten the next morning Kakashi showed carrying a large alarm clock under his arm. His three students were patiently waiting under a tree's shade. "Hello everyone! I hope I haven't kept you waiting long."

Kiba shrugged. "Not really, we've only been here about half an hour."

Kakashi sweat dropped. "O.k., well did you all remember to not have breakfast this morning?"

"Actually Kakashi-sensei Kushina was nice enough to make us a really big team breakfast. Naruto insisted we all eat this morning." Hinata said.

Kakashi sent his smiling little brother a flat look. "You know Naruto I think you being here provides an unfair advantage."

Naruto just widened his smile. "'When going on a mission or into battle a ninja should use every possible advantage. There is no such thing as an unfair advantage if it aids in completion of the mission.' That's the fourteenth ninja rule."

Kakashi just shook his head and put down the alarm clock. "I've set this for noon. You have two hours to successfully complete your assignment."

"And what is that?" Naruto asked.

Smiling Kakashi held out a pair of small bells. They jingled softly in the breeze. "It's very simple really. All you have to do to pass is take these bells from my belt. Anyone who fails to get a bell before noon fails the test and is headed back to the academy and to disgrace. In addition, whoever fails gets tied to one of those posts over there." He frowned. "I was going to tell you that who ever got tied wouldn't get to eat lunch but that seems superfluous now."

Hinata noticed something. "Uhm pardon me Kakashi-sensei, but I only see two bells."

"Good eyes Hinata. There are only two bells, which means of course that only two of you can pass this exam. One of you is headed back to the academy no matter what."

"What?!" Naruto screamed. "That's not possible! There's no such thing as a two man Genin squad!"

Kakashi laughed and shook his head. "Of course there is Naruto. There are also four man squads and on occasion a Jonin will go out with an apprentice."

"Naruto frowned. "I've never heard of any such thing!"

"Naruto, do you *really* believe that you know everything?" Kakashi said reasonably. "Did you ever ask me or Kushina if squads could only have three members? Three is considered the ideal number with a sensei, but it certainly isn't mandatory. In any case if two of you pass this and another team has only one person pass they'll simply form a new three man squad."

*Oh crap I never thought of that!* Naruto felt his stomach turn to led. He turned to look at his two teammates and saw the same panic in their eyes.

"Kakashi-sensei this is not fair! You are not giving us a chance to stay together as a three man squad!" Hinata protested.

Kakashi shrugged. "I'm sorry Hinata but you should already know that there is nothing fair in either life or in being shinobi." Under the mask he smiled. One little lie had completely shattered the unity they'd shown him yesterday. *Now let's see how strong their teamwork is when they're really up against it.*

Hinata looked at the two boys. "What are we going to?" She asked.

Naruto took a deep breath and came to the only decision he could. "We're going to get those bells Hinata-chan. And we're going to do it as a *team* just like we planned. Then you and Kiba will each get a bell." He turned to face Kakashi and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'll go back to the academy."

"Naruto-kun no! What about your dream to be Hokage?"

He smiled at her reassuringly. "I'm still going to be Hokage Hinata-chan. I'll just have to wait an extra year to get started that's all."

"No Naruto-kun!" She shook her head. "Of all of us you're the best and most deserving!" She took a deep breath. "I'll go back."

"No Hinata-chan!" Naruto stated.

"Hey! What's wrong with you two bakas?" Kiba grinned. "Like I'm really going to let you two love birds be apart. Except for Shika I was the worst in our class. I'll go back. Hey who knows, maybe I'll even learn something this time."

"No! It's my responsibility to get the two of you through!" Naruto declared.

"Who says?" Kiba demanded.

"Naruto-kun I won't let you fail no matter what!" Hinata said with a tearful heart. She wanted to be with him but she wanted him to succeed and move towards his dream more.

Kakashi coughed and got their attention. "This is every touching but please stop and think about it. Whoever fails will not be allowed to try out again for a year. Are you really willing to spend an extra year in the academy just to help others?"

Naruto looked at him and frowned. "Those who violate the rules and fail to follow orders are lower than garbage. Those who do not care for and support their fellows are lower than that! *You* taught me that niisan! When I am Hokage I will be ready to lay down my life to protect the people of this village. What sort of ninja would I be if I weren't willing to sacrifice myself to help my teammates?" He shook his head. "I'll always watch out for the people who depend on me no matter what!"

Hinata nodded proudly. "I feel the same way Naruto-kun."

Kiba put a hand on Naruto's shoulder. "Every Inuzuka understands that you must work for the good of the pack!"

Kakashi eyed them carefully. "So each of you is ready to sacrifice yourself for the good of your teammates?" He watched all three of them nod. *Finally!* "Well then I guess there's just one more thing to say." He paused dramatically. Then stuck his thumb into the air. "You all pass!"

"What?" Naruto said.

"Excuse me?" Hinata said.

"Huh?" Kiba said.

Kakashi smiled at them. "I said you all passed."

"But... but what about the bell test?" Hinata asked confused.

"The point of the bell test was never to see if you could actually acquire the bells. It was to see if you would be willing to sacrifice your individual wants for the greater good and for your fellows. You've clearly shown me that you all understand about caring and watching out for your teammates. So there's no point in having the test."

"Wait a minute! That was it? All we had to do was show you we would work together?" Naruto asked.

"That's right." Kakashi nodded.

"Then why did you fail you previous five teams?"

Kakashi sighed. "Because Naruto *none* of them ever showed themselves willing to sacrifice themselves for others. There are far too many veteran ninjas who have trouble with that concept never find ninjas fresh out of the academy. Believe me Naruto, you and your teammates really are something special."

With a huge grin he looked to Hinata and Kiba. "Yeah we are!"

Kiba laughed. "Hah! The man knows talent when he sees it!"

Hinata just stood there and smiled. Happy and relieved to know that they would get to stay together and be a team.

"All right team seven the exercise is now complete. Let's head back. Oh and Naruto by the way you were right."

"Huh about what?"

"There are no two man Genin squads."

"Hah! I knew it!" Naruto proclaimed.



Kakashi smiled. "No you didn't which is why you were so panicked."  
He chuckled. "I told you it would be hard for you to spot my lies."

They headed back as official Gennin. Team seven was officially born.

## Wave country

Akamaru barked and was in savage pursuit. The poor cat was running for his life. Ahead of the cat a young girl knelt down and held out her arms.

"Come here kitty." Hinata said gently. The cat leapt into her arms and she took hold of him. She quickly had the cat relaxed and purring. She switched on her radio communicator. "This is Hinata, target has been acquired."

"Please confirm that the target has a ribbon the right ear that says, 'tiger.'" Kakashi's voice came over the line."

"Confirm team leader." Hinata replied.

"Good job team!" Kakashi said happily. "Mission: Find the missing pet, is complete."

As Akamaru returned to the top of his master's head he was looking at the cat in disgust. "I can't believe I just wasted an hour of my life finding a cat ." Kiba complained.

Hinata frowned at him as she continued to pet the feline in her arms. "Oh be nice Kiba. The poor cat hasn't done anything to you."

He shook his head. "We used to chase Gamakichi like this for *fun*. And this is supposed to be a mission?"

"It's a D-rank mission Kiba." Kakashi sighed and tried to explain. "You are all brand new Genin. These kinds of missions are where you get the experience necessary to move on to bigger and better things." Kiba grumbled but didn't say anything more. "Come on let's get back to the Tower and report in."

---

At the Tower they returned poor tiger to his owner, the Fire Daimyo's wife. Seeing her crush the poor animal in a hug even Kiba felt a little sympathy. It being a slow day the Hokage was actually among those handing out assignments. Since it was summer Iruka was also temporarily assigned there.

Tsunade smiled at them. "Another successful mission, your team is ripping through them at two or three a day. Now let's see, I'll give you a choice for your next D-rank. You can help paint a house, do some weeding, or do some baby sitting."

"No way! None of the above! I didn't train to be a ninja so I could rescue cats and baby sit! I want a real mission!" Kiba shouted.

Tsunade glared at him and felt a vein throb in her head. "What was that?"

"I said I want a *real* mission! Something that actually involves ninja skills!" Kiba continued to shout not feeling intimidated in the least by the Hokage's glaring at him.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Iruka spoke up. "You're all brand new Genin you can't possibly hope to do anything more than D-rank missions for now."

"For how long?" Kiba whined. "We've been doing D-ranks for a whole month!"

Kakashi knocked him on the head. "Kiba settle down. You can't just yell at the Hokage like that because you don't like your assignments."

Kiba rubbed his head and glared at his sensei. "Oh come on Kakashi-sensei! We're being wasted on these stupid jobs. We're ready to do a lot more." He looked over to his friend. "Come on Naruto back me up here."

Naruto shook his head. "Kiba we're ninjas it's our duty is to fulfill whatever mission we're assigned."

Kiba frowned. "Oh come on! You don't think we're ready to step up?"

Naruto frowned. "Well..."

Tsunade looked at him. "Tell me your opinion Naruto."

He looked at her. "Well Hokage-sama (he never called her godmother in the Tower) while I am happy to take care of any mission assigned to me I do agree with Kiba that we can do more."

"Hah!" Kiba shouted. Kakashi bopped him on the head again.

Tsunade leaned back in her chair and smiled. "You are still raw Genin. Why exactly should I assign you a higher ranked mission? Especially since I have yet to assign one to any of the other new Genin squads?"

Naruto shrugged. "Because we're the best and we're ready." He stated flatly. "We have a lot of talent on this squad and our work ethic can't be touched. We *should* be the first of the new squads to get a higher ranked mission."

Tsunade grinned. "My but you do have a high opinion of yourself Naruto."

He gave her a bit of a smile. "Well I'm not the only one. My godmother thinks pretty highly of me too, in fact she thinks I'll be Hokage one day."

Tsunade chuckled. "Yes, I know she does." She looked over the members of team seven again and glanced down at her paperwork. "All right, I'll give you something that's a little more challenging."

Hinata was shocked. *Kiba's tantrum actually worked?*

"All right!" Kiba jumped up. "Finally a real mission!"

Kakashi sighed. "Kiba, please quiet down you do want to hear what this mission will be don't you?"

"Oh, sorry." He smiled and stopped making so much noise.

Tsunade shook her head. "You will be escorting a bridge builder to his home in the Land of Waves."

"We're going to a foreign country? All right!" Kiba said. Naruto didn't say anything but he smiled and felt very excited.

"I'll have your client brought out so you can meet him."

In short order a fat, somewhat disheveled, old man with a bottle of beer in his hand entered the room. He looked over the squad and frowned. "What's going on here? They look like a bunch of wet nosed brats. Especially the dumb looking one with the dog on his head."

"What?!" Kiba roared. "I'll kill him!"

Fortunately Kakashi had a hold of him. "No Kiba, no killing the client."

The old man took a long sip of his beer. "I am Tazuna, a bridge builder of ultimate renown. Until I'm safely back in my own country where I'll be completing my next bridge, you'll all be expected to protect me, even at the cost of your own lives!"

"Geez what a pleasant guy." Naruto said under his breath.

---

At 8 a.m. the next morning team seven assembled at the gate with their client. Tazuna was looking over the ninjas and not feeling a world of confidence.

"Am I really expected to put my life in the hands of children?" He complained.

Kakashi sighed. This would be a *very* long mission. "There is really no need for concern they are all fine ninjas and I am an elite ninja and will be accompanying you as well."

He took a sip of beer. "My confidence in underwhelmed."

"What is this jerk's problem?" Kiba said quietly.

"Maybe he is just under a lot of stress." Hinata offered.

"Yeah and maybe he's just a jerk." Kiba offered.

Naruto sighed. "Don't worry about it Kiba it's our first real mission. Try and enjoy it!" Kiba gave him a look that questioned his sanity. Naruto didn't care. Even if the client was a jerk and the mission was a boring escort he was finally out of the village. He was finally *doing* something. He felt a sense of real freedom. He was finally taking his fate into his own hands.

---

Kushina stood near the gate and watched her son go. Even though she knew it was foolish she had to fight down the urge to go after him.

"Are you all right?"

Kushina looked behind her to see Tsunade smiling. "Oh I'm fine. It's just..."

Tsunade nodded. "I know, but you knew this day would come."

Kushina nodded. "Of course but it's still very hard to let him go off on his own."

"He's not alone you know. He has Kakashi and his teammates with him. And even if he were on his own you have done an amazing job training him. I'd say he's already a match for half the Jonins in this village."

"I know that but I can't help but worry about him now that he's somewhere I can't reach." She sighed. "Even with the servants the house is going to seem very lonely without him there."

Tsunade put a comforting hand on her friend's shoulder. "Why don't you come and have dinner with me and Shizune tonight at the Hokage mansion?"

Kushina thought about that a moment and nodded. She would appreciate the company.

"Any way it's a simple low priority C-rank just something to give them a little bit of experience. I'm sure they'll have an easy time." Tsunade reassured.

---

As they walked along the road the three Genins had taken the lead and were together as a group about fifteen feet ahead of Tazuna. Kakashi was bringing up the rear about ten feet behind the client. As they walked along Kiba was watching Akamaru chase a butterfly and both Naruto and Hinata were enjoying the scenery. As they walked he noticed a puddle of water in the middle of the road. He knew it hadn't rained in a few weeks.

"I'm going to talk to niisan for a second." Hinata and Kiba both simply nodded. He dropped back to where Kakashi was. He was next to Kakashi as he approached the water puddle.

"You noticed the puddle." Kakashi said quietly.

"Yeah," he replied just as quietly. "Ambush?"

"Probably, warn the others and be ready."

Nodding Naruto half walked half jogged back to Kiba and Hinata trying very hard not to look as though he were alert. "Kiba, Hinata," he said in a whisper. They both gave him their attention. "Act

casually but we're about to be attacked." They both stiffened a bit but didn't anything more. "Hinata-chan activate your blood line."

She gave the barest of nods. "Byakugan." She used her blood line to search the area. "There are two behind Kakashi!"

In an instant his sword was in his hand and he had pivoted around and was rushing towards Kakashi. "Kiba with me Hinata cover the client!"

Tazuna froze as the three children who had been walking in front of him suddenly turned and were rushing towards him. His eyes were drawn to the blonde boy with the red and black clothes he had a sword in his hand. He saw the boys face for just a second before he was past. But that one look was enough to freeze his spine. The little girl stopped in front of him and was in some sort of weird stance. It was only as he turned around to watch the boys rush past that he suddenly saw two foreign ninja about to rip Kakashi apart.

That was what Naruto saw as well. Two ninjas with respirators, each wearing a gloved metal claw with a nasty barbed chain running between. They had already wrapped the chain around him and before Naruto could get there he saw his niisan torn apart.

"Niisan!" Naruto howled.

"Kakashi!" Kiba cried out.

The two clawed ninjas wasted no time and rushed towards them.

"Take the one on the right." Naruto ordered as he bore down on the other one. Even as furious as he was he still felt his mind do an evaluation on the choice of weapons. He decided that their choice was stupid. A claw and a chain were no match for a good sword. As the enemy closed on him he quickly dropped the sword low in front of him. And when he was on top of his opponent he drove his sword straight up and out in one smooth motion. He didn't miss. From the man's groin clean up to his neck his katana bit deep. The enemy



ninja was gutted like a fish. His chest showered out blood and man fell to the ground flapping about for a bit before he was still.

It all took just a few seconds. With one enemy down he quickly pulled his sword back into the ready position and turned to his right. He saw Kiba nail the other one with his fang over fang technique. He hit his opponent square in the chest and he was down on the ground. Naruto rushed over to his last enemy's side and raised his sword over his head ready for another killing blow.

"Naruto stop!"

Naruto froze and looked behind him. "Kakashi niisan!" Kakashi was standing just a few feet behind him. "But..." Naruto looked to where Kakashi's, 'body' had been. There he saw a roughly severed log. "Oh! You used a substitution!" His relief at his niisan's survival was quickly replaced by anger. "Why did you let us think they'd killed you?"

"Sorry about that. But I thought it would give me a good chance to evaluate you all in real combat situation. Are any of you hurt?" Everyone shook their heads. "You all did excellently! Hinata good job covering and protecting the client. Kiba excellent attack, it was very effective. And Naruto, I couldn't have done better."

He smiled and nodded. Kakashi had a way with words. "Thanks niisan."

"But Naruto, from now on don't call me that when we're in the field. I'm fine with it when we're training or at home. But on missions call me sensei or just plain Kakashi."

"Why?"

"You give an enemy an advantage. If they hear you call me that they're likely to think we have a special bond and change tactics accordingly. Let's not give our enemies any more information than we need to. Now then." He picked up the survivor. "I'm going to have

a little chat with our friend here." He lifted the survivor over his shoulder and carried him into the woods to 'chat.'

Naruto calmly took out a rag and began wiping off his blade. He slowly became aware that all three people still there were staring at him.

"You killed that man." Tazuna said in a small voice.

Naruto looked up from his cleaning and smiled at the old drunk. "Still think we're just a bunch of wet nosed brats?" Tazuna quickly shook his head and took several steps away from him. Hinata and Kiba were both looking at him oddly. Naruto let out a sigh. "This is the first time you've seen someone killed isn't it?"

Kiba and Hinata both nodded. "Are you all right Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked worriedly.

He smiled and nodded. "This isn't the first time for me remember? This is the eighth person and fourth ninja I've killed."

"Do you feel all right? Are you upset or bothered?" She asked.

Naruto shook his head. "I'm fine Hinata-chan. I've learned to turn my feelings off when I kill."

"You turn your feelings off?" She asked sounding a little stunned.

He looked at her seriously. "The very first time I killed Hinata-chan was that time at the academy. I killed a Chunin and four villagers. Looking at what I had done to those men tore me up inside. My mom told me that the only way to be able to kill and not go insane was to turn your heart off at those times and stop feeling."

"Naruto that sounds horrible!"

He nodded. "That's just what I said to my mom. But it's the only way to be able to do it and not go insane. We're ninjas and we have to kill some times, there is no changing that. But we can still be human and

we can still feel, just not at those moments. For those moments we have to stop being human and be only shinobi."

Hinata slowly nodded. She knew her Naruto-kun had a kind and loving heart. She could never have loved him the way she did if he hadn't. But she had just witnessed another side of him. It was a hard and ugly side, but she understood that it was something every ninja had to have in order to survive. She suddenly wondered if she had it as well somewhere inside.

---

Kakashi came out of the woods about fifteen minutes later. "I've tied our friend up to a tree. I'll send a message back to Konoha and have the ANBU pick him up." He now turned to Tazuna and the frosty look he gave him made the old man shiver a bit. "As I suspected those ninjas were here for you. You were their target. He claimed not to know the reason why he was hired. But I suspect that you do."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then let me make things clear for you." Kakashi spoke with a harsh tone. "I believe you were being deliberately deceitful when you put in your request for this mission. This mission was assigned a C-rank because you informed us you were concerned about ordinary bandits and criminals. Had we known you were in danger from other ninja we would have assigned it a B-rank or higher and a much more veteran squad would have been assigned to you. As it is you have deliberately lied to me and my team and what is worse to the Hokage! Therefore I am terminating our contract with you and returning my team to Konoha."

"You can't do that!" Tazuna exclaimed.

"Oh I most certainly can! Willful deceit is grounds for terminating any contract with my village. As my squad's sensei I am responsible for their lives and well being. I am not about to put them in a situation they aren't ready for."

"If you break our contract I'll sue your village!"

Kakashi shrugged. "Feel free. All right team seven we're going back to the village."

"Wait!" Tazuna shouted, truly panicked. "If you go I'm a dead man!"

Kakashi gave the man a very flat stare. "I'll give you *one* chance to explain yourself. I warn you, if you leave anything out then I will terminate the mission."

Tazuna nodded. "I understand. You're right I did know there'd be ninja after me."

"Baka! Why didn't you tell us that?" Kiba demanded.

Tazuna sighed. "Because if I had your Hokage would have assigned it a B-rank and I simply couldn't afford that. The Land of Waves is a poor country and I simply don't have the funds available."

"So instead you ask a Genin squad fresh from the academy to do a job that should be handled by a team of Jonin and Chunin?" Kakashi inquired.

"I am sorry about doing that but I am desperate. A real scary man wants me dead."

"And who is this scary man?" Kakashi asked.

"You've probably heard of him. He's a billionaire in the field of marine transportation. His name is Gato."

"Wait a second! You mean the shipping and transportation magnate? *That* Gato? They say he's one of the richest men in the world."

"Oh he is." Tazuna nodded in disgust. "He is also a murderous criminal who will break any law to turn a profit. He came to my country a year ago under the guise of a business venture. Before long a horde of criminals descended on us to enforce Gato's will. By

fair means and foul he quickly gained a monopoly on all transportation in Wave country. For an island nation marine transport is our life's blood. He swiftly destroyed our economy and drained off all the wealth of the land. The only thing he has to fear is the completion of the bridge I have been working on for some time."

"I see," Hinata spoke up. "And as the architect of the bridge and the overseer of its construction you Tazuna-san are very much in his way."

Naruto nodded. "That means the ninja who attacked you were working for Gato."

Kiba nodded and tried desperately to keep up with the conversation.

"So that's the whole truth. Gato wants me dead to prevent completion of the bridge. So are you still going to abandon me to my fate and condemn all of Wave country to that monster's control?"

Kakashi let out a deep sigh. "Tazuna, I sympathize with your situation, I really do. But the fact is my squad is just not ready for this sort of mission."

"Who says?" Kiba spoke out. "Kakashi-sensei we can definitely do this! I mean what's the other choice? Run home with our tail between our legs?" His grimace showed what he thought of that idea.

"Kiba, there is no disgrace in withdrawing when the situation is more than you can handle. It's called a tactical retreat." Kakashi stated.

"I agree with Kiba." Naruto said firmly. "I say we need to continue with this mission."

Kakashi frowned. "This isn't a game Naruto."

Naruto deliberately looked over at the body that was still lying in the middle of the road. With the summer heat it was already starting to attract flies. "I know that nii... uhm sensei. But like Kiba said, who

says we're not ready? We dealt with these two easily and that was without your active participation. Why aren't we strong enough to continue?"

"Naruto these two were Chunin. I could have dealt with them by myself. The next attack will either involve greater numbers or a Jonin or even a few Jonin. Do you feel up to that?"

He nodded confidence never wavering. "Yes I do. I think we have an amazing team and I think team seven can do whatever it has to. Besides, Tazuna and the people in Wave country need our help."

Kakashi sighed. "They're not even paying for the amount of help they need."

"Is it just about the money then?" Naruto frowned. "Because I thought being a ninja was about helping people who need your help."

"It's about helping your village and carrying out the missions your village assigns you." Kakashi clarified.

"Well we have a mission from our village. And even if it has been given the wrong ranking I think it's worth doing! I say we help Tazuna and the people in Wave country."

"Hell yeah." Kiba agreed. "Come on Kakashi-sensei how can we abandon them now that we know what they're facing?"

"Kakashi-sensei I also want to continue this mission." Hinata stepped forward. "I agree with Naruto-kun and Kiba-kun, this mission is truly worth carrying out."

Kakashi looked at his three students. Damn it they were earnest! *I am going to regret this.* He slowly nodded his agreement. "All right, if you're all willing to continue in the face of the danger we'll push on."

---

The little man was yelling and complaining and almost hysterical that the demon brothers had failed. The ninja shook his head. Why did money have to be so damn important? If the world worked properly skill and power would be the only things that mattered. But no, money mattered too. With enough money he could buy enough supporters to pursue his dream again. *I will be the Mizukage one day! I will return to the village hidden in the Mist and have my revenge!*

The little man glowered at him. "And now he's hired ninjas to protect him you damn fool!"

With ease he brought his massive sword to the man's throat. "Watch your damn mouth. Who do you think you're talking to? I am Momochi Zabuza, the Demon of the Mist. I will take the hit myself and eliminate this man that worries you so much. Then you will pay me what you owe me."

"Fine," the little man said and looked relieved as the sword was pulled away. "But you had better not fail."

The ninja laughed. When it came to killing he *never* failed.

## Zabuza

They arrived in Wave country in a small boat. Despite now being on a serious mission Naruto was loving it. He found he really enjoyed traveling and seeing new things. He had never been outside of Fire country, never been on a boat before, never seen the ocean before; this mission was just one new experience after another. Once they had landed they began the walk towards Tazuna's home.

Kakashi gathered his team together around him before they set off. He spoke quietly so as not to alarm Tazuna. "It's extremely likely we'll be attacked again on the way to Tazuna's home. We can also expect the next attack to be much more serious than the previous one. Kiba and Hinata I want you to use your abilities to keep a careful watch out for any surprises." They both nodded. "Naruto, I want you stay right beside Tazuna the entire time, even if we are attacked. His safety is your responsibility understand?"

Naruto nodded. "Yes Kakashi ni... uhm Kakashi sensei." *Damn, it's going to take me awhile to get used to that.*

"Remember an attack may come at any time from any direction. Stay alert and be ready for anything." On that cheerful note they headed out. Kiba and Hinata walked up front while Kakashi was the rear guard. Naruto walked beside Tazuna.

"You know I never thanked you for speaking up for continuing to help me. I don't think your sensei would have agreed if you hadn't. I really do appreciate it."

Naruto smiled at him. "You're very welcome. I happen to believe that people with power should try and help others. What this Gato has done is despicable and needs to be stopped."

Tazuna eyed the boy carefully. "You know you seem like a very fine young man. Talking to you I can tell you have a good heart."



Naruto nodded. "Thanks."

Tazuna hesitated to continue. "Tell me though, how can someone like you kill so easily? I saw what you did with your sword. And once it was done you didn't seem to care."

Naruto sent the man a serious look. "Once he was dead I *didn't* care about him. I hit the target and looked for other targets."

Tazuna stared. His mouth was a bit dry and he wished he had a beer with him. "How... how can you be so idealistic one moment and so... cold blooded the next?"

Naruto gave him a grin. "Simple, I'm a ninja." Tazuna didn't ask any more questions.

Ten minutes later Kiba picked something up on the wind. He immediately put a fist up signaling a halt. Kakashi was by his side and they were talking quietly. Naruto remained by Tazuna.

"I've got two scents; they're both still faint maybe a mile or so up ahead." Kiba explained. "Whoever they are they didn't use this road to get there, not from this direction at least."

Kakashi nodded. "Hinata?"

Hinata nodded understanding. "Byakugan." With her blood line she began searching ahead of them. It took her a moment to spot them. "I've found them. There are two of them standing in a tree talking. One is an adult with bandaged over his mouth and a huge sword on his back. The other one is smaller, probably near our age and wearing a mask like a hunter nins. They're both definitely ninjas and they seem to be Mist nins."

Kakashi nodded and was very glad for his team's abilities. "Are there any other ninja in the area?"

Hinata searched for another couple minutes. "No, just those two."

"All right come with me." He led them to where Tazuna and Naruto were waiting. "There looks to be an ambush lying up ahead. Tazuna you need to be ready in case you have to run. Naruto whatever happens stay with Tazuna." Naruto nodded.

"If we know they're waiting for us why are we continuing up the road?" Tazuna asked.

Kakashi smiled. "Simple, because even if we avoid them they aren't going to simply go away. If we can sneak you past them they would still remain a threat and might attack us later when we *aren't* ready for it. The best option is to eliminate the threat now."

"All right, but why do I have to come with you?" Tazuna whined.

"Because I am *not* splitting my squad up while in enemy territory facing an unknown force." Kakashi shrugged. "If you feel safe waiting here for us while we fight that's fine. But if some thugs show up looking for you you're on your own."

"You know you're not very good at setting a man's mind at ease."

"My job is to protect you not make you feel comfortable. So do you want to come with us or wait here?"

Tazuna sighed; it was no fun having to choose the lesser evil. "I'll come with you."

---

Zabuza was well hidden as the party came around a bend in the road. He quickly looked them over. His first impression was that the Demon brothers were highly over rated. They'd been beaten by a single ninja and three *children* (Haku was a special exception.) But then he took a closer look at the only real ninja. "Well I'll be," he whispered. "Kakashi of the sharingan eye." His opinion of the Demon brothers was restored. For whatever that was worth. "Haku."

"Yes Zabuza-sama?" The boy answered in a low whisper.

"This enemy is more dangerous than any you have ever faced. I want you to remain hidden do you understand?"

He bowed his masked head. "Yes sir."

Beneath the bandages Zabuzza smiled. "Watch closely this should be quite an interesting fight." Pulling out his massive blade he got ready.

---

"Everyone take cover!" Kakashi shouted as a huge blade came spinning through the air. Everyone ducked and Naruto pushed Tazuna down to the ground. When they looked up the blade was imbedded in the trunk of a tree. And standing on the blades cumbersome handle was a ninja. Kakashi recognized him immediately, as did Naruto, from the Bingo book. "Well if it isn't Momochi Zabuzza, the kid who ran off and left the land of the mists."

"Heh, always good to be so famous. Kakashi the copy ninja, if it wouldn't be too much trouble could you hand over the old man?"

"Sorry I can't do that." He pulled up his hitai-ite to reveal his sharingan eye.

"Didn't think you would, just common courtesy to a fellow professional. But if you won't hand him over to me that means I'll have to kill you." Grabbing his sword he disappeared.

"Manji battle formation! Protect Tazuna! This enemy is on a whole other level than anything you've faced before." The three Genin formed a triangle around their client. Naruto had his sword out, Kiba a kunai, while Hinata preferred to wait in her fighting stance without a weapon. As they all watched a thick fog rose up all around them. "All of you keep alert. Zabuzza is a master of the silent kill. Letting your guard down around him means a one way trip to the next life."

As the fog thickened an amused voice seemed to call out from all directions. "There are eight targets. Throat, spinal column, lungs,

liver, the jugular vein, the subclavian artery, heart, and kidney... so many choices what vital vulnerable place shall I chose? Heh, heh."

And then without warning he landed in the middle of their formation. Before Kakashi or any of the others could act he swung his sword and neatly cut into Tazuna's neck. Only to have him disappear in a puff of smoke.

"What?!" The three Genin launched themselves at him without concern. Being so close they were able to get a hold of his arms and delay him just a moment. Instantly half a dozen kunai came out of the bushes and struck Zabuza in the chest. His form immediately became water and splashed down on the ground. Somewhere from the trees above four senbons came down and struck each of the ninjas still there. Each disappeared in a puff of smoke.

---

"Damn it." Kakashi muttered softly. *I knew it wouldn't be that easy as soon as I saw who it was.* They were momentarily in a stalemate as both his team and Zabuza and his partner were hidden. But he had an ace to play. "Hinata?"

She pointed to a tree about fifty yards away. "They are both up there." She whispered.

He nodded and turned to Naruto. "Can you make me about twenty shadow clones?" Naruto quickly nodded and performed the jutsu. Team seven had some truly incredible assets; byakugan, shadow clones, sharingan, rasengan, chidori, summoning (frogs and dogs), and tracking ability. Kakashi began to realize that this squad had the potential to not be just good but truly great, maybe even legendary. But first they needed to survive this fight. He hadn't exposed his sharingan yet. He knew very well the strict limit of his own body when using it. He lifted his hitai-ite and exposed it now. Time to put an end to this fight and to the Demon of the Mist.

---

"He is good. His team was never even exposed." Zabuza said softly.

"Zabuza-sama I do not believe I have ever heard you speak of someone with such respect before." Haku said.

"Kakashi is an enemy that deserves to be respected." And as he watched twenty clones of the same blonde ninja launched themselves out of the bushes towards their hiding spot. "Stay hidden!" Zabuza leapt away towards the nearby river thinking it would be the spot to give him the greatest advantage.

From his hiding spot Haku watched carefully. Along with the many clones of the blonde boy he saw Kakashi, the girl, and the dark haired boy emerge and close in on Zabuza as he was quickly dispatching the clones. Haku noted that their target had not appeared. *Could he be in those bushes where they were hiding?* Tazuna was fated to die for that was the will of Zabuza-sama, but no one else had to. If Tazuna died right now Zabuza would break off and end the battle. Zabuza was not one for unnecessary risks once the mission was accomplished. Haku decided to go ahead and take a look in those bushes. With a hand sign he teleported.

---

There was too much vegetation between where they were and the river for either Naruto or Tazuna to get a good look at the battle. But Naruto had another way of knowing what was going on.

"Damn," Naruto muttered beneath his breath. "He really is good."

"What can you see something?" Tazuna asked worried.

"In a way. When my clones are destroyed I get their memories. And the last one of my clones just got wiped out. I managed to do him a little damage but now it's up to Kakashi and the others." Then he felt a chakra signature right above him. "Get down!" Naruto leapt onto a surprised Tazuna and pushed him to the ground. As he did so he was struck by a dozen senbons that had been aimed at the bridge builder. Most hit his back and simply bounced off his body armor. A couple hit his unprotected arms and sunk in. The pain was minor and they didn't slow his reaction time any. He reached into a pouch and

quickly tossed some kunai where he thought the signature was. A ninja leapt out of the tree and landed about twenty yards away. From the size of him Naruto guessed he was a kid as well. He had on a mask that covered his whole face and held three senbons in each hand. Naruto was swiftly back on his feet with his sword out and standing in front of Tazuna in line between him and his enemy. "Stay down! I will protect you with my life!" Tazuna did exactly as he was told.

"You are quite skilled. To have blocked my attack as you did was no easy feat." A polite and serene voice spoke.

"Thanks." Naruto kept his sword ready and waited. "Are you going to come on in and fight me?"

"No." Haku fired off the six senbons in hand. Seeing where they were coming from Naruto seemed to have no difficulty in blocking them with his sword. "You really *are* skilled."

"Thank you, but if you want to *really* see what I can do with this sword why don't you come a bit closer?"

"I think not. Given the fact you wear a sword you are almost certainly a close combat specialist as is my master. I likely would be no match for you in close quarters. Fortunately I do not need to get near you to fight you."

Naruto smiled. "Neither do I." With a quick motion he drove his sword into the soft earth to free up his hands. " **Shadow Clone Technique.**" The instant the jutsu was done he snatched his sword back up again. Fifteen clones came into existence. At that moment Naruto suddenly realized something. NONE of his clones had a sword! When he'd performed the jutsu his sword hadn't been in his possession so of course the clones had been created with nothing more lethal than kunai on them. He'd never thought that in the heat of battle once his sword was drawn he wouldn't have time to reholster it in order to perform a jutsu. (If it had blood on it of course.) He made a mental note to talk to his mom about getting a wakizashi.

In any case the clones all took out kunai and launched themselves at the enemy. Naruto's opponent never even bothered to take a step. He calmly stood there and tossed senbons at the clones. They were all destroyed before any of them could even get close.

"Well that was a waste." He muttered. He nodded grudgingly and even lifted his sword in a quick salute. "You know you're pretty damn good too."

"I thank you." Haku spoke with sincerity. "You are not my enemy and I do not seek to kill you just as Zabuza-sama does not desire to kill your teammates. But the bridge builder must die."

"Well the only way you're killing him is by killing me first."

"I see." Haku said calmly.

Naruto stood there and waited. His opponent also seemed to be feeling patient. Naruto considered how far away he was and estimated the distance to be twenty yards. *I could cover that in one leap. But he's just standing there like he wants me to rush him. If I do rush him is there any way he could get to Tazuna before I reach him?* Kakashi's instructions had been for him to remain at Tazuna's side and protect him no matter what. Naruto grimaced and decided he would do just that.

Haku eyed his opponent with disappointment hidden by the mask. It seemed the blonde ninja was not going to attack him directly and give him an opening to use his teleportation jutsu. Unfortunately his only method of long range attack was senbons and his foe seemed able to deal with those. *We are in stalemate. He cannot reach me to use his sword. But neither can I get past him to the target so long as he remains where he is.*

They remained as they were for about one minute. The situation was finally resolved when they heard a loud shout.

"Zabuza-sama!" Haku performed his teleportation jutsu and disappeared.

---

" **Water Style Water Dragon Missile.**" Kakashi and Zabuza both cried out in the same instant unleashing a pair of gigantic dragons to leap out of the river and swiftly annihilate each other.

"Damn it!" Zabuza muttered. This wasn't going well. To begin with he had a few wounds on his chest and back from those damn clones and their damn swords. After that he'd had to deal with Kakashi who seemed able to read his mind. He had two of his brats on the river bank watching him and backing him up but staying out of the fight. Kakashi was the real problem though. He seemed able to..."

"Read my mind." Kakashi said.

*What?! That's impossible! Curse him he's...*

"Got that sickeningly evil look in his eye... right?"

"Shut up you damn parrot!" Zabuza began forming a new jutsu. But as he did so he seemed to see an illusion of himself standing at Kakashi's side. *What the...*

Zabuza hesitated, Kakashi did not. "**Water Style Giant Waterfall Technique.**"

Zabuza cried out as he was caught up in a gigantic cyclone of water and tossed about like a leaf in a storm. He was finally slammed hard into a tree and collapsed to the ground his back to the tree. Looking up he saw Kakashi land in a tree limb just above him. "You... can you see the future?"

Kakashi drew out a kunai and nodded grimly. "Yes, and what I see is your death."

"Kakashi behind you!" Hinata cried out.



Kakashi leapt away just in time to avoid some senbons. Before he, Hinata, or Kiba could do a thing Zabuza's partner landed at his side. Grabbing a hold of him the new arrival performed a hand sign and they were both gone.

"Damn it! It was so close."

"Kakashi-sensei what can we do?" Hinata asked as both she and Kiba arrived at his side.

"There's nothing we can do now about Zabuza. Let's get back to Naruto and Tazuna."

---

They found Tazuna a bit shaken but otherwise unharmed. Naruto quickly related what had happened to him.

"You did a good job Naruto. You did exactly what I told you to." He looked to Kiba and Hinata. "You have all done a wonderful job and I am very proud of you." With that he yawned and then collapsed, being caught by Naruto before he hit the ground.

"Kakashi!" Naruto laid him on the ground. "Hinata-chan can you help?"

She quickly knelt down beside him and performed a diagnostic jutsu.

"What's wrong with him?" Kiba asked worriedly.

"His vitals are all strong." Hinata said with relief. "He seems to just be suffering from physical exhaustion."

"It's the sharingan." Naruto said with certainty. "Kakashi has told me that because he lacks an Uchiha's body he can only use his sharingan for so long before it exhausts him." Naruto frowned. "Zabuza must have pushed him too hard. He'll be fine he just needs some rest." He looked to their client. "Tazuna how far is it to your house?"

"About five miles."

Naruto nodded. "O.k. we'll get there in five minutes."

Tazuna laughed a bit. It felt good to laugh after being so terrified. "Maybe we can get there in an hour."

Without much thought he cut open his palm, wiped off the blood, and holstered his sword. "We're getting there in five minutes." Naruto used a tone that said nothing was up for debate. "No more walking we're *leaping* the rest of the way." Kiba and Hinata both nodded.

"Leaping? What are you talking about?" Tazuna asked.

Naruto performed his jutsu and four clones came to life. "With Kakashi out of action I'm leading team seven. And right now I think our best course of action is to get to your house and set up a base camp as fast as possible. So I'll use my clones to carry you and Kakashi as we leap through the trees."

" *Through* the trees?" Two of his clones took a hold of Tazuna. "Hey! I'm fine with walking." As one they all leapt into the air. "Ahhhhhhh!!!"

---

Kakashi opened his eyes. He was inside somewhere on a floor underneath some blankets.

"Are you all right teacher?"

Kakashi looked up to see a fairly attractive woman in her twenties with dark hair. "I am fine." He replied weakly. "I am Kakashi by the way. And you are?"

"I am Tsunami, Tazuna's daughter. My father was feeling a bit ill when you all arrived but he's alive and in one piece. He has told me everything that has happened and I know I owe his life to you and your students." She bowed to him. "Please accept my deepest thanks."

"We are very happy to help. Can you tell me where my students are now?"

"I am right here Kakashi-sensei." A friendly face came into view.  
"Naruto-kun and Kiba-kun are in the next room getting something to eat. Are you hungry?"

"Yes Hinata, I am actually but first could you bring the boys in here?"

"Hai!"

In short order his three students were all kneeling around him.

"What's the situation?" Kakashi asked.

Naruto answered. "Well I have four of my clones acting as a guard outside the house. Hinata-chan has searched the area for a one mile radius and found nothing. Kiba went on a patrol with a couple of my clones to back him up. He found nothing suspicious and no other scents for three miles. So for right now I think we're secure. I'll keep some clones to watch all night."

Kakashi nodded slightly. "Good job Naruto. It will probably take me about a week to recover my strength. You're in charge until then."

"Right Kakashi ni... uhm sensei. What do you want us to do?"

"Well since you all know the tree climbing and water walking exercises there's really no special training I can give you while I'm bed ridden. Keep Tazuna safe at all costs and try to get in some training when time allows."

"Kakashi-sensei," Hinata spoke. "What about Zabuza and his partner?"

"Zabuza was hit pretty hard by my last jutsu. I'm guessing he's going to need some time to recover as well. If he does show up before I am ready the most important thing to remember is that for shinobi

the one thing important above all else is teamwork. That is where your greatest strength lies."

And as one, they all nodded.

---

Haku was sitting by Zabuza's bedside as the door opened. In walked the greasy little man with a pair of samurai who were trying to look mean. *I wonder if they understand I could kill them all easily.*

"You've got some nerve showing your face again after such a miserable failure! Demon of the Mist, hah! That's a joke." He signaled for his bodyguards to wait and approached Zabuza's bed. "Nothing to say for yourself?" He reached for Zabuza's face.

Instantly Haku had the man's wrist in his fist and began crushing it. "Don't defile Zabuza-sama with your touch!"

"Aaaargh!!" Gato screamed out in pain. "How dare you?!" Gato's samurai began to draw their swords. But before they could even pull them out they found Haku standing between them holding their own swords a bare inch from their necks.

"You don't want to do that right now." He hissed. "I am in a very bad mood."

Gato gripped his throbbing and broken wrist. *You'll pay for this you little bastard!* He was furious but was intelligent enough to understand he was not in a strong position at the moment. For one of the very few times in his life Gato decided retreat was in order. "All right you can have one more chance. But if you fail again don't come back."

"I understand." Haku returned the swords to their hapless owners. "We will not fail you." His politeness only rubbed salt in Gato's wound. He and his samurai quickly departed.

Haku returned to his seat by Zabuza's side.

"That was not necessary." Zabuza spoke in a strained voice. In his hand beneath the covers was a kunai. "I could have dealt with him."

"I know Zabuza-sama. But had you done so we might have found ourselves on the run again from *them*. "

Zabuza sighed. "True."

"Let us be patient for just a little while."

"Yes," Zabuza agreed. "But only for a little while."

# Haku

As they sat around talking a small boy walked in and hurried over to Tazuna.

"Are you o.k. grandpa? I was afraid I was never going to see you again."

Tazuna smiled and gave the little boy a hug. "I'm fin Inari." He turned to where the ninja were watching them. "Everyone this is my grandson Inari. Inari the fellow lying down is Kakashi and that is Naruto, Kiba, and Hinata." He smiled at the boy. "These brave ninja have protected me and their going to help me finish the bridge and rid us of Gato."

The boy looked past his grandfather at the strangers with real interest. "You're here to fight Gato?"

The blonde one smiled at him and nodded. "That's right! We've sworn to protect your grandfather from any bad men who might want to hurt him. In fact I'd like to think we're being just a little heroic." Naruto thought of his father.

The boy sent him a hurt look and suddenly seemed on the verge of tears. "You're an idiot!" The boy shouted. "You're all gonna die! Don't you know there's no such thing as heroes?" The boy immediately fled.

"Hey you twerp!" Kiba shouted.

"Kiba be nice he's just a little boy!" Hinata scolded.

"Inari! Come back and apologize to our guests." Tsunami called after her son.

Tazuna looked to his guests. "I am very sorry about that; please forgive my grandson's rude behavior. There are... reasons."

Naruto shrugged. "No problem." He stood up. "Please excuse me." He wanted to find the boy and try to assure him that they had not come all this way to simply die. He went to the second floor and found a door with a small carving on it that said, 'Inari.' He was about to knock when he heard sobs.

"Daddy." A broken cry came from the other side of the door.

Naruto paused. He then slowly turned around and went back downstairs.

---

The next day Kiba and Hinata came to a halt on some tree branches a couple miles from the Tazuna home. Kiba had put a trickle of chakra into his nose which gave him a hundred times better sense of smell.

"Anything?" Hinata asked just a little nervous.

But Kiba shook his head. "Nothing at all. So far the morning patrol looks like a cake walk."

"I hope things stays quiet." Hinata said softly.

"Hah! Not a chance!" Kiba said eagerly. "We'll definitely have to fight again sooner or later. And next time I'm sure we won't just be watching!"

"You really *want* to fight?" She asked.

Kiba looked at her in surprise. "Don't you?" It was then that the radio communicator hissed to life.

"This is blonde boy to dog boy and pretty girl. What's your status?"

Kiba switched his communicator to send. "We're wrapping up the morning patrol we haven't found anything blonde boy. How are things at your end?"

"The bridge is quiet. I've actually got a hundred of my clones running around helping with construction."

Kiba laughed. "Are they all making minimum wage?"

Naruto's laughter came back over the com link. "No, I'll donate my labor."

"Say blonde boy when we get back thank your mom for getting us these radio communicators. I know they're not standard equipment and I know they're expensive."

"Yeah well, when it comes to protecting me kaasan has never been one to scrimp. I should tell you how much custom made body armor costs some time! All right if there is anything at all contact me. Blonde boy out."

"Roger that, dog boy out." Kiba smiled at Hinata. "Come on, let's finish up the patrol and get some lunch!" Hinata followed quietly behind her teammate.

The day passed quietly for both parts of team seven.

---

The next morning before sunrise Naruto left the Tazuna home. He hadn't worked the sword in a week and wanted to get in a couple hours of practice before breakfast. The only ones awake as he left were the clones who were guarding the house. They would inform everyone what he was doing and when he'd back. And of course he had his radio communicator on.

---

Haku got his basket and quietly exited the building. Zabuza was sleeping soundly. He would go find the herbs he needed to brew up the medicinal tea. Zabuza hated the taste but always drank it. It was still pre-dawn hopefully he could find what he needed and be back before Zabuza awoke.

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As Haku was busy gathering up the roots and grasses he needed he spotted a white carnation. He smiled, and even though it was silly he plucked it and put it in his hair. He knew it was childish but he liked it. As he stood up he heard someone grunting not too faraway. It was almost dawn and the sky was light enough to see without any problem. Being a bit curious, and certainly not being afraid, he decided to investigate. He came upon a clearing and there was the blonde in the red and black body suit working with his sword. Haku simply stood still at the edge of the clearing and watched. As the blade slashed and jabbed through the air Haku noticed the beautiful footwork and the grace of movement. He compared it to how his master trained. Zabuza's sword work was all straightforward slices and attacks. They were brutally effective but hardly what anyone would call graceful. But then again given the massive size of his blade many of the blonde's moves would have been impractical or even impossible. Haku was aware that the proper course of action would have been to quietly withdraw. Yet he was entranced by the beauty of what he saw. It was like watching a wonderful ballet or theater performance. One simply wanted to stand there and admire the artistry. After about five minutes the ninja finally came to a halt in the middle of the clearing. He seemed to be breathing heavily. His back was turned but Haku could notice the blonde had the sword resting on a shoulder.

"Hello." Naruto called out. He slowly turned around so he could face the stranger standing there at the edge of the woods. "I was wondering if you would introduce yourself. Since you haven't allow me to introduce myself." He gave a polite bow. "I am Naruto, a ninja from Konohagakure."

"Oh, I apologize, but I did not want to disturb you." Haku took a couple steps forward into the clearing. He too bowed. "I am Haku and I am originally from a small village in Water country."

Naruto smiled. "Well I hope you won't take this the wrong way Haku but except for my mom and my girlfriend you're the prettiest girl I've ever seen."

Haku smiled. "Well thank you, but I think you should know I'm a boy."

"What?!"

Haku tilted his head and grinned. "Do you require proof?"

"No!" Naruto began to blush. *No way! He's like miles prettier than Ino!*

Haku had a good laugh. "I *do* apologize for disturbing you. To be quite honest I thought your training was simply beautiful and wanted to watch. It almost reminded me of ballet."

Naruto smiled and tried to get over his embarrassment. "Well thank you the forms are actually called 'dances.' There are five of them. The one I was just doing was called the, 'dance of the lilies.'"

"I had never heard of that." It was true; Zabuza had never mentioned such a fact. "You are obviously very skilled with your blade. Tell me why are you out here all alone so early in the morning?"

"Well to keep my skill sharp and to keep improving. I'm pretty good now but I'm no blade master like my mom."

"Really how far along are you?"

"Well there are five levels of skill to the blade. I am only at the second so I still have a ways to go."

Haku gave him a curious look. "Tell me why do you work so hard?"

"What do you mean?"

"I was just wondering. You mentioned your mother and your girlfriend. Do you work so hard for their sakes and the sakes of others who are precious to you? Or do you do so for your own satisfaction?"

Naruto smiled one of his big smiles. " *Everything* I do is for the people that I love. For my mother, my girlfriend, my older brother, my godmother, my aunt, my granddad, my friends, and for every single person in my village. They are *all* precious to me. My dream is to be Hokage one day. That is what we call our supreme leader. I want to be Hokage so that I can always watch over and protect everyone."

Haku couldn't help but compare that to Zabuza's dream. He also wanted to rule his homeland, but not so he could help others. He lusted for power the way some men lusted for young flesh or the way Gato lusted for money. "I can understand that, working so hard for those who are precious to you." Haku sent him a look tinged with real jealousy. "You are truly fortunate Naruto to have so many precious people in your life. For me there is only one person, but he is more precious to me than anything. I would do anything for his sake. You know I truly believe that when people are protecting something precious to them they truly can become as strong as they need to be."

Naruto nodded. "That is very true."

Haku nodded. "Well if you will excuse me I really must be going home now." He paused. "It was a real pleasure to meet you Naruto. Please do not find this rude, but I sincerely hope we do not meet again." He turned to go. "Though I fear we will."

As Haku began to leave Naruto spoke in a casual tone. "You know Haku I've managed to develop some very keen senses."

Haku halted and looked back over his shoulder. "Really?"

Naruto nodded. His sword was still in hand resting against his shoulder. "Yes, for instance I can tell that even though you are not molding chakra at the moment that you have the ability to do so. More to the point I recognize your chakra signature as that of the ninja I fought two days ago."

Haku slowly turned about to face him. Naruto simply stood where he was calmly eying him. "I see." Haku tilted his head and eyes him curiously. "Are you going to attack me?"

"No."

"Why not? I am currently unarmed. Were you to attack me you would have an excellent chance of killing me."

Naruto shook his head. "I don't kill unless I have to. Were this battle or had my mission goal been to kill you I would have done so. But at this moment we are not in a battle and my mission is to protect Tazuna not kill anyone. You said before that we were not enemies. Well I agree with you."

"Other ninjas would not feel that way." Haku said quietly.

"Like Zabuza?"

Haku nodded. "He would not pass up the opportunity to remove an obstacle to his goal."

"Well fortunately I have different role models; my mom and my older brother and my dad. I'll do what I have to but I don't fight or kill needlessly." He sighed. "You know if you and Zabuza left it would be over."

Haku shook his head. "I am afraid that is quite impossible. For Zabuza-sama failing or declining this mission is not an option."

"Why?"

"Because the reward will help him to achieve his dream."

Naruto shook his head. "Even though it seems we are bound to face one another again I still won't attack you unless you attack me first." With that he put his sword back into its scabbard. (As it had been drawn for training rather than battle, there was no need for blood.)

"You are very honorable Naruto." Haku looked very sad. "If things were different I would very much like to call you friend."

Naruto looked at the boy consideringly. "You're obviously very honorable as well. Why do you show Zabuza such loyalty? I read about him in the Bingo book I know he butchered an entire class of students at his academy. I know he tried to overthrow his government and became a missing nin. He's a cold hearted mercenary. How does someone like that get such loyalty?"

"Do not speak of Zabuza-sama that way!" Haku said. "He is my one and only precious person." And suddenly Haku wanted, no *needed* for Naruto to understand. "Once I was precious. For I belonged to my parents. I was born in a snowy little village in the land of Water. I was happy; my parents were good kind people. But just as I was getting old enough to really notice the world around me something happened."

"What?" Naruto asked feeling entranced.

"Blood, my blood." Haku spoke sadly.

"What are you talking about?"

"My father killed my mother and tried to kill me." Haku said matter of factly. Naruto gasped and simply stared at the other boy.

"Why?" Naruto choked out.

"The land had seen generations of non stop warfare. Among its people those who posses kekkei genkai, skills that come out of our genetic inheritance, are loathed abominations." Haku continued in a calm tone. "The kekkei genkai refers to clans whose bloodlines give them powers like mine. Inherited skills that were exploited and twisted, used to cause horrible slaughter. Until we ceased to be looked on as warriors or even weapons, but were condemned as the harbingers of doom. After the wars were over we who possessed this trait were hunted. Only able to survive by hiding the existence of

our skill and our bloodline away. Exposure meant certain death. We are special, we are powerful, and we are feared. My father learned that my mother came from such a clan and before I even realized what I was about to do... I killed him." Haku paused for a good bit. Naruto thought he had revealed all that he had meant to. But in a weary voice the boy continued. "And then I knew what I was. It was the most painful thing, and I was forced to accept it."

"What?" Naruto couldn't help but feel the boy's pain.

"That I was alone in the world, superfluous, unwanted, shunned. I was all alone, and I knew that if I died no one would care or even notice." Haku paused again and tears fell from his eyes. "That was when Zabuza-sama found me. He adopted me, even knowing of my kekkei genkai. The very thing that others hated me for he not only accepted but cherished and wanted!" Haku smiled as his tears fell. "I was so happy! I was needed! I was wanted! I had someone precious to me and I would give everything for him! I'm sure you don't understand my pain Naruto. What it's like to be all alone and hated for something you were born with. But that is what I endured and that is the hell that Zabuza-sama rescued me from. And *that* is why I would die for him! And do so gladly so long as it helped him!"

Naruto slowly nodded. "It's true that I don't know what it's like to be all alone. For a long time the people who cared for me were few, but I was always loved and always wanted. But Haku, I know what it is to be hated because you were born with a terrible power inside you."

"You have a kekkei genkai?"

"No, sealed within my body is the Kyuubi no kitsune, the nine tail demon fox spirit." Haku stared at him. "My father was the Hokage of Konoha and when Kyuubi attacked he knew the only way to save the village was to trap the Kyuubi within a new born human child. And that is what my father did. He sacrificed his own life to transfer the demon fox into his new born son, me. My father saved the village and he is beloved, his memory honored. But from the day of my birth there have been people in my village who would have gladly

murdered me. I survived only because my mother and a few others risked their lives to protect me. Even now when I walk through the village some people look at me with hatred and revulsion." He shook his head. "I don't know what it's like to be alone Haku but I do know what it's like to be hated for something you had no choice in." He looked at him. "By the way everything I just told you is known to my sensei but not to my two teammates. I ask you to please keep my secret as I will keep what you have told me in confidence."

"If it was a secret why did you tell me?" Haku asked.

"Because I wanted you to know that I understood, at least a little bit."

Haku slowly nodded. He reached up and took the flower that he had in his hair. "I would like to give you this." He approached Naruto.

Naruto eyed him but did not move. "You want to give me a flower?" He grinned a bit. "I did tell you I have a girlfriend didn't I? I don't like you in *that* way."

Haku grinned as well. "You are quite safe Naruto. I promise I will not try to steal you away from your girlfriend." He stood before him and held out the flower. "This is a white carnation; they are supposed to be good luck."

Naruto looked at him seriously. "Considering what is likely coming are you *sure* you want to wish me good luck?"

Haku nodded. "I do, please accept it."

Naruto reached out and took the flower. "Thank you." He placed it in one of his pouches.

Haku sighed. "I have no friends in this world. Other than Zabuza-sama I have no one. I wish we could have been friends."

Naruto held out his right hand. "Shake my hand Haku and we are friends."

Haku looked at him in surprise. "How can you say that when you know we will have to fight each other?"

"Because Haku that is how the world is. Sometimes friends must fight each other, not out of hate, but simply because the causes and people they follow lead to conflict. But even if the sides we are on force us to combat one another I would like us to be friends as well."

Slowly Haku lifted his hand and placed it in Naruto's outstretched palm. "Thank you my friend."

---

Naruto watched Haku leave. He wondered what the future held and hoped there was some way he could avoid having to kill someone he considered a friend.

His radio communicator sparked to life. "Naruto-kun?"

He hit the send button. "Yes Hinata-chan?"

"Are you almost done with practice? Breakfast will be ready soon."

"I'm heading back right now. I'll see you in a bit." It was time to get back to his team and mission.

---

Zabuza noted when Haku returned with his basket of sharp smelling herbs. "You're back a bit later than usual. Anything happen?"

Haku smiled. "Nothing at all Zabuza-sama."

---

Uchiha Damas looked about the Inn. "This is the place we were supposed to meet the client isn't it?"

Madro nodded. "It's the only Inn of the White Horse in this village."

Damas looked about suspicious at how empty the place was. "Have you got a bad feeling about this? I mean all the way to Rice country



for a C-rank, and at the price! And who pays up front when they don't have to?"

Madro smiled. "Oh come on, the price and the up front payment were because the client insisted that the team include an Uchiha with the sharingan. Let's face it you're in high demand."

Damas shook his head. "Something does not feel right."

As he spoke a tall thin man entered the Inn's common room. "Well hello! Are you the two Chunins who have come to fulfill my request?"

Both of them rose to their feet. "We are and you are our client?" Madro asked.

The man smiled broadly. "I am indeed. Now which of you is the Uchiha?"

Damas frowned. "I am and that tone is not appreciated."

The man laughed. "My apologies."

And suddenly Damas was screaming. He felt dozens of kunai slam into his body. He dropped to his knees shaking. Looking over he saw Madros in the same shape. "Genjutsu..." He choked out.

"Yesss." The client took out a kunai and walked over to them. He smoothly and neatly sliced open Madro's throat. Damas could only watch as his friend and partner spilled to the floor dead.

"Why? Who... are you?"

The tall thin man laughed. "I am Orochimaru the ninja of legend."

"Orochimaru?" it was a struggle just to talk never mind fight or run. "What... do you want?"

"Your body."

Damas suddenly saw a gigantic snake appear before his eyes. Just before he began screaming as his soul was torn away.

## The bridge

It had been seven days, and in that time there had been no sign of Zabuza or his partner. They were all sitting at the dinner table. The members of team seven were all joking and laughing with one another. Kakashi was telling what sounded like a tall tale of how he had once spotted Jiraiya peeping at a women's bathhouse back when he was still a stiff necked Genin. "So I tell him he is breaking the law and that his behavior goes against the ninja code."

"What happened next?" Kiba asked eagerly.

Kakashi smiled beneath his mask. "Well he started doing this weird dance hopping about on one leg telling me he was a great and powerful ninja."

Naruto laughed. "Oh yeah! My mom calls that dance the, 'pervy shuffle.'"

"So what happened next Kakashi-sensei?" Hinata asked curious.

"Well I tried to perform a citizen's arrest and we started arguing, when who should come out of the baths, in nothing but a towel, but Tsunade?"

"Godmother?!" Naruto burst out.

Kakashi chuckled and nodded. "The very same. At the time they were still teammates. Well of course the second she saw him there she *knew* what he'd been up to. And she proceeded to beat him pretty much within an inch of his life."

"No way!" Kiba exclaimed. Akimaru barked his disbelief as well.

"Did that *really* happen or is this just another one of your silly lies?" Naruto looked suspicious.

Kakashi looked earnest. "Oh come now, have I ever lied to any of you?"

"YES!!" All three students shout in one voice. Immediately not only team seven but Tazuna and Tsunami burst out laughing.

Inari sat there miserable. As he sat there he began to weep.

Hinata was the first to notice. "Inari are you all right?" She asked with a concerned tone. "Why are you crying?"

The laughter dissipated and all eyes turned to the boy. A few days earlier Tazuna had explained how the boy's father figure, a hero in his eyes, had been executed trying to oppose Gato and his thugs.

"You're all idiots!" The boy declared loudly. "You train and you patrol and what good do you think it will do? No matter what you do you'll never be a match for Gato's thugs! You all act cool and talk tough but big strong guys like that are always too much for people weaker than they are. They'll destroy you!"

Kiba and Akamaru growled but Hinata put her hand over his and sent him a warning look.

Naruto leaned back in his chair and looked at the sobbing boy seriously but kindly. "We are not weak Inari. We are all ninjas from Konohagakure. If we seem confident it is because we are ready to protect your grandfather and fulfill our mission whatever the danger. And because we believe and have faith in one another. We are a team, we are one, and come what may we will stand by each other and by your grandfather."

"Just watching you ticks me off! You laugh and you joke like all of this is some stupid game! And you try and act like you have all the answers! You don't know what it's like to be me! You don't know a thing about suffering or loneliness or what my life is like!"

Naruto looked at Inari and thought about Haku. He felt the same sympathy for Inari as he did for Haku. "That's true Inari." Naruto answered quietly. "I won't pretend to understand the pain you've suffered or your loneliness. But I *do* know what it's like to weep. There's nothing wrong with tears Inari if they come in honest grief. But at some point the tears have to stop and you have to *act* . If things are wrong then you have to try and change them."

"What would you know about it?" The boy shot back.

"Your grandfather is with you right now because we *chose* to help him. We could have gone home when we found out that this mission was going to be a whole lot rougher than we expected. But we didn't. We are here now to help your grandfather and everyone in the Land of Waves. We will put ourselves in danger to try and help others. Isn't that what heroes would do?" He paused. "Isn't that what your father would do?"

"Shut up!" Inari ran from the table.

"Please excuse me." Tsunami got up and left as well.

The table was silent for a moment.

"Naruto." Kakashi said quietly.

"Yes ni... uhm sensei?"

Kakashi looked at him sadly. "You sounded very much like your father just then."

Naruto nodded in deep appreciation. "Thank you niisan."

Kakashi looked them over. "All right, I'm well enough to return to duty. Tomorrow Hinata, Kiba and I will accompany Tazuna to the bridge. Naruto I want you to stay here and protect Tazuna's family." They all nodded.

---

Zabuza crushed an apple in his hand.

Haku nodded happily. "Most of your strength seems to have returned.

"Excellent!" Zabuza turned to Haku. "Tomorrow."

Haku nodded and smiled. He buried his concerns for Naruto. *I will do as Zabuza-sama wishes.*

---

As Kakashi, Hinata, Kiba, and Tazuna came to the bridge they saw the workers were all down.

"What the hell?" Tazuna shouted.

"This is it." The team formed a tight circle around Tazuna. Kakashi switched his radio to send. "Naruto! Get to the bridge right now!"

"I'm on my way." His voice answered.

Four Zabuzas landed around them. They were dispatched almost instantly. The clones became water and splashed down on the bridge.

"I didn't think that would work." Zabuza called. Standing next to him was the same ninja in the same mask they had seen before. "You're one short it looks like. Where's the blonde with that damn sword?"

Kakashi smiled. "Don't worry he'll be here in a minute."

Zabuza chuckled. "Well then all the more reason not to waste any time and deal with you while you're short handed." Zabuza nodded to his partner and they began to approach, each from one side of the bridge, well apart.

Kakashi judged the situation and made a quick decision. "Zabuza is mine. Hinata, deal with his partner. Kiba, stay by Tazuna's side and protect him no matter what!"

"Right!" Kiba pulled out a kunai and bore his teeth.

"Yes, sensei." Hinata took a quick gulp and got moving. Her heart was beating fast, this was it. Her first *real* combat. *I can do this! I have to do this. Tazuna and my team are depending on me. I **won't** let them down!*

---

The four clones that were on guard duty were all well hidden. When they spotted the two samurai approach one swiftly took out his kunai and slashed his palm, causing him to disappear. The real Naruto immediately received the memories and understood the situation. He quickly got to Tsunami and Inari. "Please come with me you need to hide." Ignoring their protests he got them quickly hidden.

The two samurai approached the front door with their swords already out. They didn't hear anything. Checking the front door they found it wasn't locked. Quickly and quietly they entered. They were soon in the living room. There they halted as they saw a young boy who was obviously a ninja standing there with a drawn katana.

"Hello!" He said in a chipper voice. "Can I help you with something?"

The two of them stepped apart and got into some sloppy fighting stances. "Where is Tsunami?"

"Oh I don't think she's the one you need to be worried about right now. I'll give the two of you *one* chance to surrender. Drop your swords and fall to your knees."

The two of them laughed nervously. "Is that a joke?" One of them asked. "You really think a little kid like you has a chance against us?"

Naruto sent them a cold grin. "I'm a ninja who has spent his life being trained for battle. You're just a couple of thugs with swords. Now who do *you* think is in trouble here?"

The samurai who had spoken shook his head. "Get real we're not surrendering to a pint size brat like you."

Naruto shrugged. "Fine, then you can be number nine and you can be number ten."

"Huh?" That was his last word as a sword pierced him from behind and went out the front of his chest. His friend met a similar fate. Neither one had even suspected there were a pair of clones behind them. Naruto had the clones take the bodies out so that Tsunami and Inari would at least be spared that sight. There was nothing he could do about the blood splatter all over the carpet though. Dipping his sword into some of the blood he wiped it off and hurried up the stairs as he holstered it. Opening the upstairs bedroom door he found Tsunami with Inari wrapped in her arms.

"It's over. But I think it would be best if the two of you went to a neighbor's for awhile. Do you have any friends you can stay with?"

Tsunami nodded. "Yes we do."

"Don't bother packing. I'll escort you there and stay to protect you." But then his radio came to life.

"Naruto! Get to the bridge right now!" Kakashi's voice called.

Naruto hit the send button. "I'm on my way." He looked back to the two of them. "Looks like it's happening. I have to go but my clones will stay to escort and protect you until I can come back."

Inari stared at him, his eyes weeping. "You're really going to fight Gato's men?"

"Of course!"

"But aren't you scared?" The boy wailed as he trembled in his mother's arms.



Naruto put a hand on the boy's shoulder and smiled at him. "I am scared. I'm always a little scared when I go into a fight. But even if you're scared you have to find the strength to do the right thing. That's what being a hero is all about. And just one more thing." With his other hand he gently wiped the boy's cheeks. "Try not to cry any more, except when you're happy. Now I have to go."

The two of them watched him rush off to battle.

"Mom."

Tsunami looked down at her son. He'd stopped trembling and didn't seem to be crying now. "Yes dear?"

He looked up at her. "I want to be a hero, like Naruto and daddy."

---

"I do not require your death." Haku spoke. "If you would simply stand aside then I would not be forced to harm you."

"And would you hurt Tazuna-san?" Hinata asked.

"His life is forfeit." Haku answered simply.

"I won't allow that." She dropped into a jyuken fighting stance. "I will protect Tazuna and my teammates!" She had already activated her byakugan and was ready.

"Very well." Haku rushed in and tried to end it in one move.

Hinata was surprised at his speed but she was fast herself and with her byakugan was able to adjust. As he attacked she landed three strikes on his arm and a pair on his chest. Haku's eyes expanded as he felt his chakra system suddenly out of flux. He leapt back away from her.

"What did you do?" Haku said in alarm.

Zabuza had drawn his sword and was facing off with Kakashi, but for the moment they were both willing to just eye each other and check the progress of their teammates. Zabuza immediately realized what was happening. "She's a Hyuga using gentle fist! You can't fight her directly Haku you're no match for her and that style. If you continue she'll end up completely shutting down your chakra network. You know what you have to do now."

Haku nodded, just that one opening encounter had weakened him. Much more and he would not be able to use chakra. He eyed her carefully. "It seems I have no choice but to use my strongest jutsu." He ran through some complex hand signs. " **Secret Art of Water Ice Crystal Magic Mirror Technique.**" Water from the ocean rose up onto the bridge and as they all watched Hinata was surrounded by a series of flat ice mirrors that were suspended in the air. Haku calmly walked into one of the mirrors and seemed to meld into it. His image quickly appeared to be in all of them.

Hinata looked about and felt just a little bit of panic. To her eyes the mirrors all seemed to hold the same amount of chakra. It was impossible for her to tell which of the images was real.

"Before I begin this I would like to ask you a question. Your blonde teammate, by any chance are you his girlfriend?"

She stared in surprise. "Why would you care about *that* ?"

"I am merely curious."

She nodded. "Yes I am. I am Naruto-kun's girlfriend."

*I am very sorry Naruto but it is Zabuza-sama's will.* With that Haku began his work.

For Hinata the senbons seemed to rain down on her. She moved and dodges as best she could, but even with her blood line and fast moves she could not avoid them all. She cried out as number of them punched into her flesh.

"Hinata!" Kiba yelled.

"Kiba! Stay with Tazuna! I'll help Hinata!" Kakashi called. But as Kakashi moved to aid his student Zabuza rushed in to get a swing at him. Kakashi dodged it easily though it did cut him just a bit. He was forced to step away from where Hinata was.

"Oh I don't think so!" Zabuza laughed. "Let's not forget *I'm* your enemy Kakashi. If you go to help the girl I'll just slaughter the boy and the bridge builder."

"Damn it." Kakashi muttered. "Fine then," he pulled up his hitai-ite to reveal his sharingan.

"Ah, the sharingan again, how predictable! You know I've had some time to think about how to fight it. Tell me, what good does your eye do you if you're blind?" He performed hand signs. " **Hiding Mist Technique.**" And as had happened once before a thick fog began to rise.

Kakashi listened to Zabuza's laughter from somewhere within the fog.

Hinata kept trying to dodge as best she could, but more and more senbons were sticking in her. There seemed no way to escape them as they continued to rain down mercilessly on her. *If only I could do rotation!! But I still don't have it down!* More senbons came at her and she tried to dodge, but the senbons in her legs were slowing her down.

When Naruto got to the bridge it was encased in a thick fog.

"Kakashi-sensei!" he cried out.

"Naruto get to Hinata and help her!" Kakashi called out.

"Hinata-chan where are you?!" Naruto called out.

"Over here!" Her voice answered him.

He followed the sound of her voice until he came to a dome made of mirrors with Haku's image on all of them. Looking between the mirrors his heart skipped a beat. There in the middle of this odd dome was Hinata. She was huffing and covered in blood and there dozens of senbons sticking out of her. "Hinata-chan!"

And as she turned to answer he could only watch as a pair of needles jabbed into her neck. She gasped and began to fall. Without a second thought he raced in and managed to just catch her before she hit the concrete. Her eyes focused on him. "Naruto-kun..." she smiled for him.

"It's all right Hinata-chan I'm here now! You'll be fine!"

She barely shook her head. "No I won't." With one hand she reached up and gently touched his face. She was looking up at him with a peaceful expression. "I'm so glad I got to see you one more time."

"Hinata-chan don't talk like that!" He performed a diagnostic jutsu, one of the handful of medical jutsus he had actually been able to learn. And what the jutsu told him was that her heart was slowing and so was her breathing. "No!" he pulled her into his arms. "No! No! No! You're going to be all right!"

She simply smiled. "I am so very glad I got to tell you that I loved you. And thank you for loving me Naruto-kun. You made me very happy."

"Don't talk like that Hinata-chan, please!" He was crying. *This can't be! Not her!*

"Kiss me Naruto-kun, kiss me just once more." And he did. He leaned in and kissed her lips. Hinata looked content. "I love you." She whispered and closed her eyes.

Naruto saw her breathing stop and could not find a pulse. "No!" He howled and held her tight against him. "Hinata-chan I love you! Don't go! Don't leave me!"

"I am sorry." A polite voice said from behind him.

"Why?" He ground out as he slowly and gently laid Hinata down on the bridge.

"It was the will of Zabuza-sama, but I truly am sorry for your loss."

"Shut up!" he could feel the anger rise up in him. He could feel hatred and rage and an all consuming need to take revenge. His body began to shake as his eyes changed, his teeth sharpened and grew, his scars grew thick, and his hands became claws. The red chakra flowed out about his body and a single tail took form. " **I'M GONNA KILL YOU!!**"

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Both Zabuza and Kakashi felt it. The awesome amount of chakra and the evil that seemed to permeate it. Zabuza had no idea what it was. Kakashi knew instantly. He'd felt that same chakra on a night more than twelve years ago. Though then the chakra had been a hundred times stronger. He looked in the direction where the chakra was coming from. He could still see nothing in the damn fog. *Has the seal broken? No, but it has definitely weakened!* He quickly pulled out a scroll, bit down on his thumb and spread the blood on the scroll. "Listen Zabuza, you're a busy man, I'm a busy man, and we both have things to do. What do you say we wrap this up in one move?"

Laughter came out of the fog. "Sounds interesting, what do you have in mind?"

He performed some hand signs and slammed the scroll down. " **Earth Style Fanged Vengeance Technique.**"

"This posturing will get you nowhere Kakashi. You can't even tell where I am. While I know exactly where you are." Zabuza continued to laugh. His laughter died in his throat as the concrete all around him began to crack and split open. From the bridge floor several

dogs suddenly leaped out and sunk their teeth into him. "No!" he cried out.

"When your eyes and ears have let you down, you can always follow your nose!" he smiled as he saw the fog was beginning to lift. "When you cut me with your sword earlier you got my blood on you. This technique is designed specifically for tracking and that blood was all my pups needed to find you." He approached the now immobilized Zabuza. "I believe I told you this once before. Your future is death."

---

*What is this power? Where did it suddenly come from?* Haku leapt back into the mirrors. He immediately began to shower senbons down on him. *Is this the power of the demon he has inside of him?* Naruto merely stood there, not even bothering to try and dodge. He laughed, and it sounded nothing like the laughter of the boy he had met in the forest. This laughter was tinged with hatred. "Is that the best you can do?" Naruto's voice was deeper and huskier than it had been.

Haku quickly performed a jutsu. The air around Naruto grew cold as half a dozen ice needles formed above him. They slammed down and shattered against the red chakra cloak.

"Hey Haku we are *friends* right?" Naruto called.

"Yes, Naruto we are."

Naruto had a wicked smile. "Then let me tell you something *friend*. You have one minute left to live." And now Naruto moved. With a speed that could barely be followed by the human eye. Half the mirrors seemed to shatter in an instant. Haku realized this was too much for him.

*I have to try!* From one of the shattered mirrors he leapt out in a vain attempt to stab Naruto with his senbons. But Naruto caught him with ease. In one hand he held Haku's right wrist and broke it with no effort. The other hand he drew back for a punch. *I can't withstand*

*this chakra anymore!* Naruto punched him with all his might and sent him flying through the dome. The mask split and as Haku bounced to a stop the remaining mirrors all dissipated.

*I have failed you Zabuza-sama I am a weak and broken tool and of no use to you now.* Before Haku could even get to his hands and knees he was hauled up by Naruto. Naruto held him in one hand up off his feet. His eyes were blazing red and filled with hatred. *How did I bring such hatred out in such a decent person? In my whole life he was the only one to offer me his friendship even knowing what I was. How could I make him hate me so?*

"Your minute is almost up." Naruto said. He gathered red chakra and concentrated in into his right fist. "I have enough chakra in my hand to level a mountain; it won't leave anything of your head. Any last words?"

Haku shut his eyes and readied to die. "I am sorry."

"Sorry?! You're sorry!! Sorry doesn't bring Hinata-chan back to me!! I loved her and you killed her! Why?!"

"It was the will of Zabuza-sama and I am no more than his tool."

"You're not a tool you're a person! And you made your choice!" It was time to kill him.

Haku nodded. "That is true. I accept the responsibility for my choice. I deserve death not only because I failed Zabuza-sama but because I have also failed you. Please kill me now."

"What do you mean you failed me?"

"You offered me your friendship, and in return I have inflicted this upon you. I should have found some other way, even if we are enemies. Please know that your offer of friendship meant a great deal to me and that you are my second precious person."

Naruto stared at the boy. *No! It doesn't matter he killed Hinata-chan! Even if he feels that way he has to pay for what he did.* Yet Naruto held his fist where it was. He couldn't have said what he was feeling at that moment. Anger, sorrow, hatred, pity, all were a mad jumble inside within his heart. *I've lost Hinata-chan she's gone forever.*

" **Damn it!!**" Naruto slammed his fist into Haku's face.

---

"The man you're trying to kill is the heart and soul of this place. And the bridge he is trying to build is this land's only hope. You're willing to sacrifice this place and everyone in it just to advance your own selfish ambitions. That is *not* what a true shinobi does." Kakashi spoke.

"Spare me the philosophy lesson. I'm fighting for my own dreams and I'm not about to stop." Zabuza said defiantly.

"Maybe not, but I'm going to stop you." In his palm he began to focus his chakra.

"What? I can see your chakra."

"This is my one and only original jutsu, it's called chidori; one thousand birds. It's my ultimate finishing move. And now I am going to use it to finish you." With that Kakashi ran forward. Zabuza knew he was finished and hoped that Haku would survive. He did not beg or plead for mercy for that was not the shinobi way. As Kakashi's chidori plunged into and obliterated his heart Momochi Zabuza died like a true shinobi and like a man who lived his life all out.

---

The fog was gone and Kakashi was carefully approaching Naruto. The boy was surrounded by red chakra and was standing over his defeated opponent. Kakashi noted the other ninja's mask was gone and was lying unconscious on the ground. Kakashi was much more interested in Naruto. Naruto turned around to face him. His eyes were red and they were crying. Kakashi noted the other changes, the



longer teeth the thicker scarring, and his hands seemed to have become claws.

"Naruto are you all right?" Kakashi asked warily. He knew he had to be very careful he had no idea just what shape the seal was in.

"No niisan I'm not. Hinata-chan is dead." Kakashi gasped and looked to where Hinata was lying; Kiba, Tazuna, and Akamaru were already there. He could hear both Kiba and Akamaru howling in despair.

"And I couldn't even bring myself to avenge her."

"Naruto..."

"I knew Zabuza was nothing special!" All eyes turned to the short man in a business suit at the end of the bridge. All around him were gathered a large crowd of mercenaries obviously eager for blood. "Is that brat Haku still alive? I owe him a little something for what he did to my arm."

"Who wants to know?" Naruto asked and began walking towards him. Kakashi thought about telling him to stay but felt Naruto's killer intent and decided to just wait a bit.

"I'm Gato, the man in charge of this country. I want to thank you for ridding me of Zabuza, but now I'm afraid you and the bridge builder will have to go too."

"Is that a fact?" Naruto asked and continued to walk towards him. A number of the bandits rushed him with a shout. Naruto didn't make a move towards them, he didn't have to. Long arms formed from the red chakra cloak and they extended out to catch the men. Obeying Naruto's will the arms crushed their chests or their heads like ripe pieces of fruit. "Sixteen." Naruto said calmly as the bodies dropped in bloody heaps.

"What?!" Gato shouted suddenly frightened.

"Sixteen," Naruto repeated. "That's how many men I've killed."  
Naruto clarified.

"All right." Gato spoke and began drifting back into the ranks of the men who were suddenly not so eager to fight anymore. The mercenaries stood back and gave Naruto all sorts of room. Naruto just continued walking towards Gato.

"You have one minute to live Gato." Naruto held out his palm and began gathering chakra into a rasengan.

Gato looked around at the men desperately. "What are you fools doing kill him!"

The men all seemed to shake their heads and continue to back away. Gato quickly found himself at the edge of the bridge with Naruto coming towards him. "Look we can work something out! How about a million ryu cash?"

"No thanks I come from money. Besides there isn't enough money in the world to buy back what I lost today. You've got about thirty seconds left. Tell me, all the people you killed, all the lives you ruined, and all the misery you brought to this place. What exactly did you need the extra money for? You were already a billionaire. What could you have wanted that you couldn't already buy a thousand times over?"

Gato stared at him open mouthed. "I wanted to make more money."  
He said in a small voice.

Naruto looked at him as if he were something slimy he'd found underneath a rock. "Well I hope it was worth it to you, because your time is up." He lifted his hand to strike.

"Wait!" Gato shouted and held his hands up pleading. "I can give you anything you want just name it! Money, power, women, *anything* !"

Naruto smiled. "Anything?"

"Anything!"

"All right." Naruto said reasonably. "There is one thing I want. If you can give it to me I'll let you live."

"What is it?" Gato asked eagerly.

With his left hand he put Gato's neck in a vice. " **BRING HINATA-CHAN BACK TO LIFE!**" His right hand slammed into Gato's chest and his body exploded.

Naruto tossed what was left of the man into the ocean and turned around. The bandits were all staring at him in absolute terror. "If you want to live get off this bridge and never come back!"

There was a boat tied up to the end of the bridge that had brought these men here. A couple ladders led from the boat to the bridge. These were already full of men eager to get away. The moment Naruto made his announcement the men started leaping off the bridge and into the ocean.

With Gato dead and the threat ended Naruto was done. He let his anger go and with it the red chakra. He shuddered as the power left him and as his body transformed back to normal. With the power gone he felt suddenly weak. Just walking seemed to be all he was now capable of.

Kakashi, Kiba, and Tazuna were waiting for him by Haku. "Naruto!" Kiba called to him. "Where did that power come from?!" A little awe and little fear in his voice.

"I'll explain later I promise." Naruto said dejectedly.

"Are you all right Naruto?" Kakashi asked.

He looked to where Hinata was. "No, but I'll live I guess." *I'm never going to see her smile again, or hear her giggle or dance with her. Oh Hinata-chan!*

Kiba looked down at Haku and both Naruto and Kakashi could feel some killer intent. Haku's nose was broken and his face was blooded and bruised. He didn't look pretty at the moment. "This guy killed Hinata." Kiba said dangerously. Akimaru was on the ground growling.

"Kiba please don't hurt him." Naruto said quietly.

"Why not?" Kiba looked at him in surprise.

"Because as stupid as it sounds, he's a friend of mine."

Kiba stared at him. "You made friends with this guy while you were fighting him?"

"I'll explain later. I promise I'll explain everything later." Naruto said weakly.

"Hey did we miss the fight?"

They turned around to see Inari with a crossbow in his hands at the head of a large crowd of villagers.

"Inari!" Tazuna called out. "What are you doing here?"

The boy smiled. "I decided I wanted to be a hero and do the right thing! So did everybody else." The smile faded a little. "But I guess I didn't get here in time."

Naruto smiled just a bit. "It's o.k. I think you and everyone else who came to defend your homes are all heroes!" The crowd cheered and celebrated the end of Gato and his reign of terror. Tazuna went to his grandson's side while the three surviving members of team seven remained where they were.

---

Haku slowly opened his eyes. It took him a moment to realize that it was snowing. He looked up to see a face looking down at him.

"Naruto?"

"You o.k. Haku?"

Haku looked up at him in confusion. "Why am I alive?"

"I guess I just don't have it in me to kill someone I consider a friend, even when they've taken away someone I love." Naruto answered tiredly.

"Zabuza-sama?"

"He's dead. I am sorry for your loss. I know what he meant to you." Considering who Zabuza was and what he'd been trying to do that seemed strange to say, but Naruto meant it.

Kiba looked at him confused by what he was hearing. *He is so going to explain all of this later to me.*

Haku closed his eyes. "She isn't dead."

Naruto's body stiffened. "What?!" he knew it wasn't possible but he couldn't help but suddenly hope.

"My last attack struck nerve points that put her into a death like state but she is alive and will probably wake soon."

Naruto, Kiba, and Kakashi were all staring down at him. "If this is a joke I'll kill you." Naruto said meaning it.

"And I'll help." Kiba stated.

The three of them hurried to where she was. Naruto knelt down by one side, Kiba by the other and Kakashi knelt by Hinata's head. Naruto performed the diagnostic jutsu. *Oh please kami! Oh please, please, please!* He rested his hand on her belly.

"She's alive! Her heart is beating and she's breathing!" Naruto exclaimed.

"Thank kami!" Kiba shouted.

"Yes, thank Kami." Kakashi said quietly. It had almost happened again. He had almost lost another teammate. But thankfully, this time, it looked like everyone had survived.

---

Hinata slowly opened her eyes. She felt cold and there was snow falling down. Her eyes focused and she saw the faces of her three teammates all smiling down at her. "Naruto-kun," she whispered. "Am I dead? Is this heaven?"

He smiled at her. "No Hinata-chan," he gently pulled her up into his arms and held her tight. "You're alive my sweet Hinata-chan. You're alive."

As Naruto held her Kiba reached out and put his arms around both of them. Kakashi then leaned in and put his around all three of them. With an embrace team seven celebrated their victory on the bridge. But much more importantly they celebrated the fact that they had all survived.

## Going home

Hinata checked on her patient and smiled at him. "Your wrist will be completely healed in about two weeks. Your other injuries aren't serious and will be totally healed soon. How do you feel?"

Haku looked up at her from his hospital bed. "Why are you being so kind to me?" He asked quietly.

Hinata smiled at him. "Because you are hurt and I want you to get better."

Haku shook his head. "I was your enemy, why should you care?"

"You're not my enemy anymore and I don't blame you for being on the other side." Hinata said.

Naruto was also in the room. "I think you'll find that a lot of people don't hold grudges if you really are sorry for what you've done."

"May I speak with you alone please?"

"Would you mind Hinata-chan?" Naruto asked.

"Of course not." As she began to leave Naruto put his arms around her and pulled her into a hug. She giggled a bit. "You know it really is all right Naruto-kun. I'm fine." She assured him.

"I know that Hinata-chan. I just like holding you and having you remind me."

She giggled again. "You're silly." She gave him a quick kiss and left the room.

Naruto turned happily to the patient in the bed. "Thank you again for what you did. I will always be in your debt Haku."

Haku shook his head. "Please do not thank me for forcing you to suffer."

"It doesn't matter if I suffered. All that matters is that Hinata-chan is alive and well. Why didn't you tell me that during our fight? I almost killed you."

"Zabuza-sama always taught me to kill when it was necessary. In his eyes what I had done was weakness, and I was ashamed of it. Also seeing the pain I had inflicted on you I felt I had no right to ask for mercy." Haku paused. "I wish you had killed me."

"Don't say that!" Naruto said sharply. "I know you miss Zabuza, but you are young and have a long life ahead of you."

"As what? A broken tool?" He said sadly.

"You're not a tool; you're a person a human being."

"All ninjas are but tools to be used. When Zabuza rescued me he told me that I belonged to him mind, body, and soul. Now that he is gone I am nothing. Again I am alone. Again I am superfluous, unwanted, and shunned." Haku shivered at his memories. "Death is much better than to live like that."

"You're not alone. You have a friend standing right here. I'm your friend and I *care* about you Haku."

Haku looked at him. "I was not strong enough to be a worthy tool to Zabuza. I would not be one for you either."

"Good!" Haku looked surprised. "I don't want a tool I want a friend." Naruto went to his bedside. "Look Haku we are shinobi and that means we must be ready to do many hard things including kill or die for the ones we serve and love. But we never stop being human. Even in those moments when we must be hard and cruel we remain all too human. If you really just want to go through life as someone's tool I can't help you because I can't be anyone's owner. But, if you



want a place where people will care about you and where you will always be wanted. That I can give you."

Haku looked at him with a bit of fear and a bit of hope. "Really?"

Naruto nodded. "When my team leaves here you are welcome to come with us back to Konoha. You'd be welcome to come and stay with me and my mom."

"What... what if your mother does not like me?"

Naruto chuckled. "I think you underestimate how nice you are. Besides as soon as I tell her you're the reason Hinata is still alive she'll love you." Naruto sounded very certain.

"But I fought against you and your team." Haku protested.

"So? My mom's a ninja. She'll understand that you had a duty and personal obligation to Zabuza." Naruto gave him a big smile. "What do you say? Want to come back with me and have a real home?"

Haku thought about it for a moment and slowly nodded. "I would like that."

---

"So what is this about?" Kiba asked.

Team seven had gotten back together at the Tazuna residence. Currently Tazuna, Tsunami, and Inari were all in town enjoying a massive and spontaneous celebration. The whole town was celebrating Gato's untimely demise and the end to his reign of terror. His team had been invited to join but Naruto had asked to talk to them first.

"Well," Naruto spoke up. "There are a few things I needed to talk to you about. First off, I've invited Haku to come back with us to Konoha and to stay at my home."

"What?" Kiba said. "The guy almost kills your girlfriend and you're going to be roomies with him?"

"Kiba-kun." Hinata said firmly. "Haku could have killed me easily. He *chose* to let me live. I have nothing against him so you shouldn't either." Kiba grumbled a bit but didn't seem upset.

"Are you sure that's wise? Naruto have you really thought this through?" Kakashi asked.

Naruto nodded. "I have Kakashi-sensei. I consider Haku to be a friend and he is all alone now. He needs a place where he is wanted and I wish to give him that. And what is the down side? I gain a friend and the village gains a damn good ninja."

Kakashi thought about it. "Well he likely doesn't have any bounties on him. You would have to get approval from the Hokage for him to become a Leaf nin, and you'll have to convince your mother to let him stay with you."

Naruto nodded. "I'm sure they'll both be o.k. with it."

"Naruto how the hell do you make friends so fast?" Kiba asked.

Naruto took a deep breath. "Well you see..." he detailed the previous meeting with Haku. He was not really surprised to see they were all frowning at him, even Hinata.

"Naruto," Kakashi said sharply. "You made contact with an enemy ninja and didn't tell us about it?"

"I'm sorry Kakashi-sensei."

Kakashi shook his head. "I don't really fault you for not attacking him or even for talking with him. Though if you do this in the future you will need to very cautious. Now what I do have a problem with is you keeping this meeting *secret* from all of us. You should be able to trust your teammates with *anything* ."

"I know that Kakashi-sensei." He took another deep breath. "That's why I've decided to tell them about my *big* secret."

"Big secret Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked.

Kakashi looked at him in surprise. "Naruto I wasn't referring to *that*. "

"I know but I want to tell them. I trust both of you with my life and I think it only fair that you know the whole truth about me."

Kiba looked at him. "Does this have something to do with that insane amount of power you had?"

Naruto nodded glumly. "It sure does." He hesitated just a bit before telling them. He really did trust them both with his life. He expected they would both understand. But even if they didn't, well it would definitely hurt but not destroy him. Enough people who knew the truth were accepting of him. He understood that he was not a monster. He also understood that some people would never accept that. That many people saw him that way and hated him did not make it so. "Before I start what I have to tell you remains a secret you can't speak of it. Do you understand?"

He waited for both of them to nod. "All right I have to tell you about what *really* happened the night the Kyuubi attacked the village..." And he told them the truth of how his father saved the village and of the price of that salvation.

"You're the Kyuubi?" Kiba said in amazement.

Naruto shook his head. "No, I'm the Kyuubi's jailer. As you saw I can tap into some of its power when I'm really angry. But I am **not** the Kyuubi."

Hinata immediately came forward to glomp onto him and press her head against his chest. "Of course you're not! You're Naruto-kun! It doesn't matter what's inside of you!" She declared fiercely.

"Thanks Hinata-chan." He said very glad that she understood.

Kiba smiled. "Heh, well I always knew you were a bad ass. Now I know just how much of one."

Naruto looked at him. "So you're o.k. with this?"

Kiba nodded. "You're a part of my pack Naruto and an Inuzuka *never* abandons his pack." Akamaru barked his agreement.

Naruto let out a very deep sigh of relief. "Oh, Hinata-chan I just remembered something!" He reached into one of his pouches and pulled out a dried flower. "Could you press this for me please?"

She took the flower and smiled. "It's a white carnation. These are supposed to be good luck."

He nodded. "I know, I'm going to keep this one as a good luck charm." He smiled at her. "I figure if it helped me get through today it must have a whole lot of luck in it."

---

Team seven remained for another two weeks. They stayed until the bridge was completed. Haku recovered from his injuries and began training a bit with Naruto and the others. They ate and talked together and slowly all hostile feelings began to disappear. Haku was welcomed as a sort of unofficial fifth member. When he showed them his pet rabbit, Mr. Fluffy, Hinata went wild. Haku slowly came to think he might have a place in the world. But there were still wounds that would take a very long time to heal.

---

Haku stood before a simple grave. There was a small cross and a large sword planted into the earth. He had come here to say a final good bye to the man who had rescued him from loneliness and from death. And whom he would always cherish as his father. From behind he heard soft footsteps.

"It's time Haku." Naruto said respectfully. "We're going to meet at the bridge and say good bye to everyone there."

Haku nodded. He continued to face the grave. "Do you think he was a bad man?"

Naruto answered carefully. "Yes, I do. But I realize that very few people are completely good or bad. I can believe that he showed to you his best side."

Haku slowly nodded. He stiffened his back and bowed low to the grave before him. "Good bye Zabuza-sama. Good bye... father. I shall never forget you." He turned around and smiled. "Let's go Naruto I want to see Konoha and meet your mother."

---

The entire town had turned out to say good bye to their heroes and to celebrate the completion of the bridge. "We owe you a huge debt." Tazuna said.

Kakashi smiled. "It's all right, we were happy to help."

Inari was weeping. "I didn't want to cry anymore!" The boy complained.

Smiling Naruto went over to him and put a comforting hand on his shoulder. "It's all right to cry when you're happy."

"All right team seven. It's time to go home." Kakashi spoke. After a few more final waves good bye they leapt. Fittingly enough they would be the very first people to use the new bridge to cross over from Wave country to the mainland.

Leaping away they were soon gone from sight. "They truly are heroes." Tazuna said.

"Yes they are." Tsunami agreed. "Hey dad, I just realized something! The bridge doesn't have a name!"

Tazuna smiled. "I have the perfect name. Let's call it, 'The Great Naruto Bridge.'"

"Yeah grandpa! That's a great name!"

And that was what the bridge was named.

---

When they had originally set out it had been judged an extended C-rank mission expected to last from seven to ten days. When they returned it had been just over a month and they were returning from an A-rank. As they came up on five miles to the gate Naruto switched on his radio communicator to send. At first they were still a bit out of range but quickly they were within the five mile limit.

"Hey mom can you hear me?" Naruto called.

"Naruto-kun!" Kushina's voice came through loud and clear and Naruto felt like he was home again. "Where are you honey?

"I'm heading towards the gates kaasan. Did you get the letter I sent you?"

"I got it yesterday so your friend Haku is with you?"

"That's right." He'd sent the letter out two weeks ago. Except when ninja couriers were being used the postal services left a great deal to be desired. "He can't wait to meet you."

"Well I can't wait to meet him."

In only five minutes team seven arrived at the gates. As Naruto knew she would be his mom was there waiting. She held out her arms and Naruto decided to go ahead and act his age for a change. With a bound he leapt into her arms. She hugged her son tight and showered him with kisses. "Welcome home Naruto-kun."

"Thank kaasan." After a minute he turned to wave Haku over. "Mom, this is my friend Haku. I want him to stay with us."

Haku bowed deeply to her. "I am most honored to meet you Kushina-sama."

Kushina smiled and came over to the boy. "No need to be so formal Haku-kun. Kushina will do just fine." She bent down and hugged him. Haku immediately stiffened, he wasn't really used to being hugged. "Now let's go home and get you settled in."

---

"I'm going to live here?" Haku said in a small voice.

Naruto laughed. "I grew up here so to me it's just home. I forget sometimes that it's pretty impressive."

"It's amazing." Haku said sincerely.

Kushina cleared her throat and got the attention of both boys. "Now Haku, my son considers you a friend and for sparing Hinata you have my deepest thanks. You are welcome to stay here as long as you wish. However..." her voice took on a very serious tone. "Everyone who lives here is expected to serve and protect Namikaze. So long as you are a resident here and a friend to my son I will give you the protection of this clan and you will always have a place. In return I expect you to be willing to serve and protect this clan."

Haku stiffened and bowed deeply. "Kushina-sama I give you my solemn word that I would give my life to protect you or Naruto. I will gladly serve and protect this clan!"

Kushina smiled and ruffled his long black hair. "Well then, welcome to Namikaze."

---

"How bad was it?" Tsunade asked quietly. When Kakashi had asked to meet with her in private she knew it had to be serious.

"I'm not sure." Kakashi asked. "The demon's chakra flowed around Naruto sort of like a second skin in a bit like a fox's shape. He even had a tail made of chakra. His power was incredible, though only a fraction of what the Kyuubi's had been. When he attacked the bandits I saw him send the chakra around him out in the form of arms and slaughter six men without any noticeable effort. From talking with Haku it would seem this second skin also acts as an ultimate defense. Apparently it protects him from weapons and jutsus."

"What was his behavior like?"

"Well he was definitely angry. However he deliberately chose not to kill Haku. He also deliberately gave the men who did not attack him the chance to escape. Despite being filled with rage his personality was definitely Naruto's."

"I see." Tsunade said quietly. "Do you wish to pull him from active duty?"

"No." He replied firmly. "Nothing I've seen leads me to believe he was not in full control of the demon's power. In fact had he not had that power available I don't know how the battle would have ended. I was certainly in no shape to take on so many armed men after expending so much chakra fighting Zabuza."

Tsunade sat back and considered. "All right, for the time being we'll leave him on active duty. I'm also declaring everything that involved the demon's chakra to be an S-rank secret. Jiraiya is off the map for the moment looking for information about a certain organization. When he returns to Konoha I'll have him examine Naruto and his seal." She looked at Kakashi with interest. "All this aside how did he do?"



"He is his father's son." Kakashi said simply. "While I was injured he ran the squad as well as I could have asked. His actions were consistently designed to protect his teammates and the people we were guarding."

Tsunade nodded. "All right, thank you Kakashi."

---

Over the next three weeks team seven successfully completed six C-rank missions. None of these were extended and none proved harder than expected. During this time Haku was allowed to take the academy graduation test which he passed with ease. He agreed to take an oath to serve Konoha faithfully and was awarded a Leaf hitai-ite. What to do with him next was a problem as there were no openings on any of the current teams. Tsunade though thought she had an idea. She summoned Kushina and Haku to her office one day.

"Kushina, I have a problem." Tsunade said simply. "Actually I have two problems. And I think I have a possible solution for both."

Kushina eyed her friend carefully. "Yes?"

"Well the first problem is what to do with Haku here." The boy stood quietly at attention and said nothing. "According to the mission report from Kakashi he would seem to be at least Chunin level. But I'm not prepared to promote him or even allow him entrance into the Chunin exams based solely on that. I want him to have at least six months of field experience with a Leaf squad before I even consider the question. Now that is one problem." Tsunade pressed her intercom. "Please send her in Shizune."

Kushina looked behind her as the office door opened. In walked a teenage girl perhaps 14 or 15. She had long straight black hair and dark eyes. She wore a dark blue jacket and beige pants her hitai-ite was around her neck. The girl sent Kushina a look of surprise, and just a twinge of fear. She came to stand to Kushina's right before the Hokage's desk. "You sent for me Hokage-sama?"

Tsunade nodded and frowned. "Uchiha Gabrella, your sensei has asked me to remove you from his squad. Do you have any idea how rare that is? As a general rule a team leader will almost never request a member be removed from a squad unless there is absolutely no alternative. You've had it happen to you *twice* now." Tsunade opened a rather thick folder on her desk. "Refusal to obey orders, dereliction of duty, fighting with squad mates, missing practices, the list goes on and on with you. Frankly Gabrella I'm about ready to just call you a lost cause and strip you of your shinobi status."

"What?! You can't do that!" The girl shouted in outrage.

"Quiet!" Tsunade snapped. "I didn't bring you here to talk stand there and listen. I'm putting you on a six month probationary period. You have that long to save your career. If after six months your sensei does not give you a satisfactory review then I *will* strip you of shinobi status. What is more, if at any point your sensei wants to get rid of you I will strip you. This is your absolute last chance, do you understand?" The girls nodded once tersely. "Wonderful now please wait in the reception area."

With a snap to her step she left the office, almost but not quite slamming the door.

Tsunade sighed. "That girl has some great potential. But she has become extremely frustrated by the fact she had not developed a sharingan. Most Uchihis develop them by the time they are thirteen. She just became fifteen and the clan believes she will not develop one, her frustration has made her reckless and a discipline problem."

"And you intend to put her and Haku on the same squad?" Kushina asked in surprise.

Tsunade nodded. "Haku needs to learn how to deal with different personalities and to develop some social skills. Gabrella needs some discipline and an example of how to behave. Actually I think the key is to find just the right sensei for the two of them. Someone who can

be both a disciplinarian and show a little compassion when it's called for."

"Hmmm, well it looks like it will be a tall order. Who did you have in mind?"

Tsunade smiled wickedly. "You."

"What?!" Kushina did not believe it. "Are you joking I've never been a sensei!"

"Except to Naruto and you did an incredible job with him." Tsunade said. "But now Kakashi has got that role. You're a strong woman Kushina with a good heart and you're a hell of a Jonin. I'm certain Haku would work well with you and I think you might be able to get through to Gabrella."

"Teaching my son was a special case. I'm not even a Leaf nin." She pointed to her Whirlpool hitai-ite. "I've never even done a mission here in Konoha."

"Well it has been thirteen years since you came here. Don't you think it's high time you did one? Kushina you are far too skilled and far too valuable to just do nothing. Now that you are no longer training Naruto you need to do something more with your time."

Kushina frowned. "I'm head of the Namikaze clan. As a general rule clan heads don't usually have active duty status."

"Nara Shikaku, Yamanaka Inoichi, and Akimichi Choza are all still active duty." Tsunade sighed. "Look I won't force you, but wouldn't you enjoy a new challenge and plus it's only for six months."

Haku suddenly turned to face Kushina. "Kushina-sama, I would feel most comfortable serving under your command."

Kushina smiled at the boy. She liked him, he was a little shy and formal sometimes but he was very kind hearted and very earnest. A

bit like Rock Lee. "I'm not worried about you Haku." She turned back to Tsunade. "I don't trust the Uchihes." She said flatly.

"I know." Tsunade said with a frown. "But that is another reason for you to accept this assignment. Maybe if you're Gabrella's sensei you'll come to see the Uchiha clan is not pure evil. Maintaining the peace and security of this village is my highest priority. If I can, I want to diffuse the tensions between Namikaze and Uchiha. Come on Kushina what do you say? At the very least this will get you out of the house."

Kushina looked back to Haku. He had an eager expression on his face. *Damn it I already know I'm going to regret this.* "It's just for six months right?"

Tsunade smiled, she was hooked her now she just had to reel her in. "Just for six short months."

Kushina sighed. "All right I'll do it."

---

She smiled at the senseis that were gathered around her. "As you can probably all imagine the reason I gathered you here was to formally announce the start of the Chunin exams in one week's time." Tsunade said. "Now let's begin with this year's rookie squads. Do any of you feel confident in nominating your squads?"

Kakashi stepped forward without hesitation. "Squad seven led by Kakashi consists of Namikaze Naruto, Inuzuka Kiba, and Hyuga Hinata. I vow upon the honor of my clan the Hatake that all three of them are ready for the Chunin selection exams."

A new and difficult challenge for team seven was about to begin.

## Meeting new people

"Why do you think Kakashi-sensei just up and left like that?" Hinata asked.

Naruto shrugged. "Honestly I have no idea Hinata-chan. But I'm not complaining, we've got the rest of the day to ourselves." Kiba had decided to do some training with Akamaru. He and Hinata were walking hand in hand towards Ichiraku's to get some lunch. He wasn't sure what they were going to do the rest of the day but he knew it would be spent together. Since almost losing her Naruto had come to truly understand just how much he loved her and what a huge part of his life she was. He smiled at her and she smiled back. There was nothing like almost losing something to truly make you appreciate what you had.

As the two of them were passing an alleyway towards Ichiraku's they heard some small children shouting. Looking he saw a teen in a black outfit holding a child up in the air. A blonde girl in a very short skirt was looking on bored while two small children were shouting. Naruto recognized the kid struggling in the older boy's grip. "Ah hell, come on Hinata-chan." He let go of her hand and raced down the alley.

The older boy smirked nastily. "You shouldn't run into people brat, they might not like it."

"It was an accident! We were just playing! Please let me go!"

The teen smiled and shook the kid a little. He wasn't actually going to hurt him, but seeing him cry was kind of funny. And then suddenly he felt a blade pressing against his throat.

"Let the kid go right now, or I slice you open like a pear." A harsh voice said to him.

The blonde girl was reaching for some type of weapon on her back. Her legs were taken out and she dropped to the ground. Before she could recover a girl with pale eyes was standing over her with a kunai to her throat. "Don't interfere with Naruto-kun." She said.

Kankuro carefully looked over to his right to where the person holding the sword was. There stood a Leaf nin a bit younger and shorter than he was. But the boy had a look in his eyes that he recognized. Whoever the hell this kid was he was ready to kill. Kankuro gave a smile and carefully set the boy down. "Sure, no problem." He tried to laugh. "No harm done, I was just playing around."

"Playing around." Naruto said flatly. "You all right Konohamaru?" He asked without taking his eyes off the teen. Sarutobi had brought his grandson with him to a few of his birthday parties. Naruto wasn't especially close to the boy but he did know him.

"Yeah I'm fine, thanks Naruto!"

"No problem, I think you and your friends should go now." The children wasted no time in departing.

Kankuro gave a sickly smile. "See no harm done. So you going to take your sword off my throat now?"

"Maybe," Naruto sent him a nasty smile. "And maybe I'll play with you for a little while like you were playing with Konohamaru. I can see by your hitai-ite that you're a Sand nin. You here for the Chunin exams?"

"That's right." Kankuro didn't nod for fear of cutting himself if he did.

"Well that makes you a guest here in my village and guests don't go around threatening our citizens. Oh and by the way, that kid just happens to be the grandson of our Third Hokage and a friend of mine. As long as you're staying here remember you're a guest and that we expect you to behave like one. Threaten one of our citizens

again and you *will* regret it." Naruto finally pulled his sword back. Kankuro took a few steps back. Seeing Naruto's actions Hinata pulled back her kunai and moved to stand beside him.

Temari quickly got on her feet and stood next to her brother. She looked at the blonde ninja who still had his sword ready. *He's kind of cool.* Despite the situation she gave him a slight grin.

Kankuro was furious and humiliated. He pulled, 'crow' off his back. "You want to try that again now that I'm ready?"

Naruto nodded calmly. "If you want to fight that's fine. But understand that I'll probably kill you."

The calm certainty with which he spoke those words was eerily familiar to both Kankuro and Temari. "Kankuro maybe we should just go." Temari suggested. Kankuro hesitated, no longer sure if he wanted to push things further.

"Kankuro," an annoyed voice called from above. "Stop it! You are a disgrace to our entire village."

Naruto shot his head up to see a red haired boy hanging upside down on a tree. He seemed to have a huge gourd on his back. *What the hell? I didn't sense his chakra signature! Who the hell is this guy?*

"But he started it!" Kankuro complained and pointed to Naruto.

"Shut up or I'll kill you." The red haired boy said in a soft menacing tone.

Kankuro swallowed. "Yes Gaara, I'm sorry."

The red haired nin swiftly teleported down. He appeared near the other two and faced Naruto. "I apologize for their rude behavior." He turned to face the other two. "We're here early but that doesn't mean we're here to play around. Let's go."

"Wait!" Naruto called out. "What's your name?"

The blonde girl immediately started to blush. "You mean me?"

"No, I mean him."

The red haired boy eyed him with a small bit of interest. "I am Sabaku no Gaara at your service." He paused a bit. "I am curious to know your name as well."

Naruto gave a slight bow. "I am Namikaze Naruto."

Gaara seemed to mull that over for a moment. "Namikaze... are the son of the fourth Hokage?"

"I am."

"Then we have something in common Naruto. I am the son of the fourth Kazekage." Gaara stared directly at him and Naruto had no trouble matching the stare. "Looking in your eyes I see we have something else in common too."

"What would that be?" He asked.

"You're a killer, just like me."

"I've killed." Naruto said coldly.

Gaara looked at him for a bit longer, and then finally turned to leave. "I look forward to seeing you at the exams Naruto."

---

Kushina and Haku were in the park near the pond. There were a few ducks and Haku was happily feeding them bread. Haku was enjoying himself.

Kushina looked at the boy and shook her head a bit. *It's hard to believe someone so gentle was the partner for a bastard like Zabuza.*



It was then that Uchiha Gabrella finally put in an appearance. "Sorry I'm late." She said grumpily.

Kushina made a point of looking at her watch. "You're twenty minutes late. Your punishment is twenty pushups for every minute you kept me and Haku waiting. Now drop and give me four hundred pushups."

Gabrella stared at her open mouthed. "You've got to be kidding me! I was just a little late and this is the first time I'm meeting you as my sensei!"

Kushina lifted an eyebrow. "That would be a reason for you to try and make a *good* impression on me. Instead you choose to show blatant disrespect for my time and the time of your teammate."

Gabrella crossed her arms and took on a sulky look. "No one told me you would expect me to show up on time."

"You're a shinobi. No one should have to tell you something so basic. Do you need someone to remind you to pack your ninja gear before coming?"

"You can't really expect me to do so many pushups just for being a little late on my first day."

Kushina eyed her watch. "You just wasted another minute of my time. You're now up to four hundred and twenty pushups."

"Hey that's not fair!"

"So?" Kushina said coldly.

The girl was clearly getting angry. "How can you punish me for just talking to you for a minute?"

"I'm punishing you for not immediately obeying me when I told you to drop and give me pushups. As your sensei my responsibility is to teach and protect you. As my student yours is to follow my orders

and give me your best effort at all times." *I wish Lee or Naruto were here right now to show her what I mean. Well she'll see Haku.* "Now if you don't drop and start in the next twenty five seconds you will be up to four hundred and forty."

Gabrella glared but finally dropped down and began doing them.

Kushina let out a sigh. *I already regret this.*

---

The earlier events did nothing to damage their appetites and the two of them were enjoying their meal when their radio communicators squawked to life. "All members of team seven please meet me at our regular spot in thirty minutes. Please acknowledge." Kakashi's voice sounded.

"Blonde boy acknowledge." Naruto said after pressing down the send button.

"Pretty girl acknowledge." Hinata said.

A few seconds later they heard Kiba's voice. "Dog boy acknowledge."

Hinata looked curiously at him. "What do you think?"

Naruto smiled. "Well I don't think he would call a meeting just to tell us he *wasn't* entering us in the exams."

---

They were now standing at the practice fields about a mile from the academy. Kushina was looking patiently at her two man squad. Haku was just standing there politely waiting. Gabrella was still rubbing her arms and looking discontent.

Kushina sighed. "Well as of today the three of us will be Team Kushina. We'll be a two man squad with me as sensei. That is a bit unusual as is the fact this assignment will only last a set period of

time, six months. But all three of us are in unusual positions so we'll do our very best to make this an effective team." Gabrella let out a rude noise. "Do you wish to say something Gabrella?"

"If I do will you make me do more pushups?" She ostentatiously rubbed her arms.

"No," Kushina answered pleasantly. "But I have plenty of other ways to make you miserable. Keep that in mind."

The girl glared. "Why are you even pretending that we're a team? I'm a huge screw up and even though I don't know this kid's story." She nodded towards Haku. "He must be some kind of problem too. All you are is a baby sitter watching us to make sure we don't get into trouble."

Kushina frowned. The girl's attitude needed some major adjustment. "I don't baby sit for the Hokage, it's the other way around." Gabrella stared at her. "Do you not want to be ninja? If you don't say so right now and I'll spare us both a lot of pain and aggravation. Have no doubts that even if our make up is a bit unusual we *will* be a team and we will perform missions to serve the village. If you are not ready to give me your full effort then I suggest you tell me so right now."

Gabrella looked at her, but remained silent.

"Wonderful," Kushina spoke in a cheerful voice. "Well since we are a new team why don't we all introduce ourselves? I'll start off. My name is Namikaze Kushina. I am clan head of the Namikaze clan. I like training and being with my son Naruto and his many friends." She gave Haku a quick smile that Gabrella did not miss. "What I dislike is anything or anyone who threatens my son. I have only one goal in life, and that is to see my son become Hokage." She looked to Gabrella. "Your turn."

Gabrella sighed. "I am Uchiha Gabrella of the elite Uchiha clan obviously. I like ice cream and having fun. What I dislike are pushups

and people who make me do them for no good reason. My goal is to get the sharingan and make my father and my clan see me!"

Kushina nodded. No one could miss the frustration when she spoke that last sentence. She nodded to Haku. "Your turn."

Haku gave her a slight bow. "Arigato Kushina-sama. I am Momochi Haku. I like my bunny, feeding animals, and being with my friends, especially Naruto. I dislike and will destroy anyone who threatens those people who are precious to me. My goal is to always be able to serve and protect the Namikaze clan."

Gabrella eyed the boy with disappointment. "You sound like her groupie. And by the way it's, 'sensei' not, 'sama.'"

Haku looked at her calmly. "I prefer to call her Kushina-sama."

Kushina sighed. She had told him many times that he didn't need to call her that and had given up. "All right. Now since you both have experience we won't bother with any silly tests. We'll do some basic team building exercises today. But first I want to get a sense of your skill level. I'll spar with each of you. Gabrella you'll go first. I want you to come at me as hard as you can."

She nodded but looked a little nervous. "Uhm before we do that can I ask you about something?"

"What?"

Gabrella looked embarrassed at what she was about to say. "Well I sort of grew up with stories about you. You know... Kushina the Red Death."

Kushina sent the girl a flat look. "Yes?"

"Well I know this is stupid, but those stories. They aren't real are they?"

Kushina shook her head. "Take my word that I don't magically appear if you say my name three times and I don't go roaming the streets after dark looking for bad children."

Gabrella nodded feeling foolish but relieved. "All right. And that crazy story about you killing a bunch of drunken men and piling their decapitated bodies outside your gate. That's pretend too right?"

Kushina gave her a very happy smile. "No, *that* one is true. Please keep that story in mind the next time you think about running late. Now let's start."

With a shudder Gabrella began sparring with her worst childhood nightmare.

---

On the bridge Kakashi handed them out the applications for the exams. "I have nominated you for the Chunin exams. Competition is strictly voluntary. If you wish to compete bring these forms with you to the academy, room 301 by 4 p.m. one week from today. Remember this is strictly voluntary. If you choose not to compete it will not be held against you."

Naruto frowned. "Damn it I don't have a pen!"

"I need one too!" Kiba complained.

Hinata produced one and began filling out her form. "You can use mine after I'm done Naruto-kun." She said happily.

"Hey! Me next!" Kiba shouted.

"No! Me!" Naruto declared.

Chuckling Kakashi produced two pens. "I thought you might want to compete."

The boys each grabbed a pen and got busy. "Are you kidding niisan? After Wave country this will be a breeze!"

"Hell yeah!" Kiba shouted. "We're going to kick some major ass!"

Kakashi frowned a bit. "I like your confidence boys but please don't think for a second that this going to be easy. It's very rare for a rookie squad to even be nominated to compete, though two other teams were as well this year. It's also rare to pass on your first attempt. If you don't make it this time don't see it as a setback, view it as valuable experience for next time."

"What are you talking about niisan? Team seven is the best!" he looked at his two teammates and smiled. "We're absolutely passing and making Chunin on the first try!"

His two teammates caught his excitement and nodded eagerly.

"Naruto," Kakashi said seriously. "Just about all your opponents will be older and a lot more experienced than you. Don't start thinking you'll have a walk through. This exam will be every bit as hard as our first mission was. In some ways it will be much harder, and I won't be there to help."

Naruto smiled, his confidence not wavering for an instant. "It doesn't matter how hard it is We will definitely pass!"

---

Gabrella trudged home exhausted and sore. Just about every part of her ached. How exactly was she expected to survive this? Maybe the Hokage had deliberately made Kushina her sensei in order to drive her to quit. Well that wasn't going to happen! She wasn't quitting no matter what. She really wanted nothing more than a hot bath and bed. But she was expected to be at her aunt's house for dinner and her father would be upset if she didn't show up. Thinking of dear old dad she let herself grin. He had gone to the Hokage to wash his hands of her. She was a failure in his eyes and he'd told the Hokage to do whatever she wanted with her, the Uchiha clan

was uninterested. Today's events had *one* bright spot and she was about to enjoy it.

She entered her aunt's home and removed her sandals. "Is anyone home?"

Her aunt answered her. "We're in the dining room dear about to have dinner come join us."

Gabrella entered the dining room and sat down. The only person who got a smile from her was her aunt. Her dad and her mopey cousin got disinterested looks. "So Sasuke, is your squad taking the exams?"

He sent her a very thin smile. "Of course we are. Kurenai-sensei gave us the applications this afternoon." His face took on a steely look. "I expect to make Chunin." To make his point he activated his sharingan and showed it to her.

*Damn show off! Of course he gets it before he even turns thirteen! What is wrong with me? **Why** can't I activate mine?* "I hope you're ready for it. The Chunin exams can be rough."

"Heh, for you maybe." Sasuke sneered.

"Sasuke!" her aunt Mikoto said sharply.

"Your son has a point." Riyuki noted. "I'm sure **he** won't fail the exam four times and end up a Genin for life."

"Riyuki that is not fair to Gabrella. She tries very hard and I am sure she will make it there eventually." Mikoto spoke.

*Typical, my aunt defends me from my father who just wants to tear me down.* "Thank you auntie. I am still trying my best father and I am on a new team and have a new sensei."

Her father was unimpressed and did not even bother to respond. "How is your new team dear?" Mikoto asked.

Gabrella sighed. "Very strange. I only have one teammate and he's a little boy who is really quiet and polite and eager to please."

Sasuke smirked. "Is he any good? Because if he is he sounds like the exact opposite of you."

"Sasuke!" Mikoto sounded upset. Riyuki made an agreeing sound. Gabrella had to bite down to keep from screaming in his face.

"So who is your new sensei dear?"

Gabrella waited a heart beat to let her father start drinking some tea. "Namikaze Kushina."

And as she'd known he would he coughed up his tea. Gasping he needed a minute to talk again. "What?! The Hokage assigned you *that woman* as your sensei?! This is an outrage! I'm going to the Tower right now and tell the Hokage..."

"What exactly dad?" Gabrella cut in with a sweet voice. "Are you going to tell her that you're going back on your word? That now suddenly the clan *does* care about me? Wouldn't that make you and the clan look awfully *weak* to just go back on your word like that?" She knew, oh did she know, that her father despised the appearance of weakness. And so now he was trapped by his own words into calling someone he absolutely loathed his daughter's sensei.

"Anyway," she continued in a chipper voice. "I wouldn't worry about it. Not only does she seem to be an excellent teacher but he two of us really hit it off. I think we're going to become very close." The look on his face made every pushup and ache in her body worth it. *Ah, sweet revenge.*



## The exams begin

Sakura was focusing her chakra into the fish. *Not too much! Just enough into the vital organs.* Suddenly the fish began to flap about. Surprised she pulled back a little. *I actually did it!*

"Sakura!" A sharp voice called. "What are you waiting for? Put the fish back in the tank!"

"Oh! Yes Ichala-sensei!" She quickly grabbed the large fish and tossed him back into the tank. When she had started this training some months ago the thought of even touching a slimy fish had grossed her out. Now she didn't even give it a second thought. With the fish now back in the tank she turned back around to face her sensei. Sakura immediately froze. *Is that a smile? I didn't think she even knew how to smile.*

Ichala noticed how Sakura was looking at her and she smiled vanished. "There something wrong cherry blossom girl?"

"No, sensei."

Ichala eyed her for a moment and slowly nodded. "I have to tell you Sakura, your progress has been much faster than I expected." Ichala saw her student's chest begin to puff out. "But then of course I didn't expect much from you." Sakura's chest deflated just as quickly. Ichala put a hand over her mouth so Sakura couldn't see her chuckle. "The Chunin exams begin tomorrow don't they?"

"Yes sensei."

As if by magic Ichala reached behind her back and produced a small cloth pouch. "Here this is for you."

Sakura took it warily. "What is it sensei?"

"A personalized med kit. I made it for you. Inside you'll find bandages, antiseptic, morphine, soldier pills, gauze and some other useful items."

"Thank you sensei!" Sakura actually moved to give the woman a hug but Ichala was fast enough to back away.

"Don't hug me girl or I'll make you give it back to me." Sakura nodded. "Now are you ready to finish up the session with our usual ten laps around the Uchiha complex?"

Sakura finished attaching the med kit to her belt. "Yes sensei!"

And there it was, Ichala actually smiled at her. "In honor of your being in the exams tomorrow, this one time only, I'll let you skip it."

"Really sensei?"

"Get out of here Sakura before I change my mind. And good luck in the exams."

"Thank you sensei!" Sakura fled as fast as she could.

---

The next day the plan was for team eight to meet at 3 go over a few things and then walk over to the academy. So Sakura was a bit surprised when Shino came knocking at her family's door a little after 2.

"Shino, has something happened? Did Kurenai-sensei change the meeting time?"

"No Sakura, we are still expected to meet at three o'clock." Shino said in that emotionless calm voice.

"Then what are you doing here?" She asked.

"I would like you to come take walk with me." Shino said simply.

She looked at him with just a little bit of concern. In the three months they had been teammates he had not exactly, 'warmed' up to either her or Sasuke. That was not to say he was not a good teammate or that he did not look out for them. It was just he had a very solitary and quiet personality that did not mesh all that well with her intense forth right ways. "Why? What is this about?"

"It is about me being a good teammate. I ask only that you take a short walk with me and listen to what I have to say." Shino said.

"Oh all right."

---

They had been walking for about five minutes in an uncomfortable silence. Well it was uncomfortable for her. Shino was usually quiet so she supposed he was all right with it.

"Tell me Sakura," he suddenly spoke and took her by surprise. "How would you describe me?"

"What?"

He looked at her with his glasses over the high collar of his coat. As usual his expression was hidden. "I would like you to tell me honestly how you view me."

"Uhm, o.k., you're intelligent, honest, patient, quiet, and very dependable."

He nodded simply. "Am I in the habit of making false accusations or wild statements that are not backed by logic?"

Sakura shook her head. "No, you hardly say anything and when you do it's always the truth and I'd have to say it is always pretty logical."

He again nodded. "Am I someone driven by wild passions to do and say mad and irresponsible things?"

Sakura started to laugh. Shino and wild passion? No she couldn't even picture that. "No Shino," she tried to stop laughing. "You're not."

"Do you think I would do or say anything to deliberately hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No Shino, you're a good guy and a good teammate."

And once more he nodded. "Please keep all these conclusions in mind as I relate to you the following." He came to abrupt halt and turned to face her. "Sasuke is using you and you would be best served to end your relationship with him."

She stared at him not believing it. This was just about the last thing she had ever expected to hear from him. About the only thing that could have surprised her more would have been if he had suddenly proclaimed his love for her. Once she got over her shock she started to get angry. "Did Kurenai put you up to this?"

"No, I came to this conclusion independently. Has Kurenai also spoken to you about this subject?"

Sakura clamped down on her lips. Kurenai had taken her aside and gently hinted that her feelings for Sasuke were not returned and that she might be better off with someone else. Being a woman Kurenai had at least known how to phrase it and bring things up indirectly to try and protect her feelings. "Shino," she said defensively. "Whatever happens between me and Sasuke is none of your business."

"I disagree. Whatever affects the performance of this team is most certainly my business. And Sasuke is beginning to have a negative effect on you. When you are not at his side you are intelligent and strong willed and you are beginning to become a fine kunoichi. But when you are under Sasuke's eyes you become no more than his puppet. You cease to be concerned with what is best for the team and you care only what he thinks of your performance. Your concern about his opinion of you is slowly deteriorating your effectiveness both as an individual shinobi and as a member of this team."

She bit down and ground her teeth in fury. Why did people keep trying to force themselves between her and the one she loved? Ino, Kurenai, and now even Shino. Why couldn't people just mind their own business? "I'm very sorry you feel that way Shino. But I honestly don't see how my feelings for Sasuke could possibly make me weaker when I've been doing tons of extra training because I want to be stronger for him. I'm also very sorry that you feel that you have to try and hurt me just because you don't want me with Sasuke."

"Feel? My arguments have nothing to do with emotion. They are based on logical conclusions derived from evidence I have observed. It is you Sakura who base what you say upon feelings and emotions rather than on logic and evidence."

"I don't care what you say!" She shouted at him. "I love Sasuke and nothing will change that!"

Shino stood there and looked at her for a moment. "I see, but he does not love you."

"What?!" She gasped and took a step back. "Why would you say that?"

"Like my previous statements Sakura. That one is based on logic gathered from visual evidence. If your behavior towards Sasuke is evidence of your, 'love' for him. Then I am left to conclude that given his complete lack of similar behavior he also has a similar lack of its cause. His actions are not consistent with someone who is concerned for your contentment or safety. Rather his actions are appropriate for someone who is only interested in gaining the greatest possible use from you."

The words reminded her of the argument she'd had with Ino after the prank at the academy. Their words were a bit different but the message was the same. They both tried to convince her Sasuke was using her. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

Shino waited a bit. "Is that your entire argument? You do not wish to believe what I have to say and so I must be mistaken?"

"Don't take that tone with me." Sakura crossed her arms over her chest.

"What tone is that?" Sino asked not even sounding curious.

"That smart superior tone that says you know so much more than me!"

"You are mistaken Sakura the tone of my voice has not changed at any point in our conversation. However I recognize now that my efforts are wasted. It is clear that you are determined to hold to your beliefs regardless of any argument or evidence put to you. You are usually quite intelligent Sakura, but when it comes to Sasuke you have a blind spot. To you Sasuke can do no wrong. Anything or anyone who challenges this assumption is simply dismissed out of hand. You are bound and determined to hold onto this idealized version of Sasuke regardless of the actual facts."

"All I know is that I love Sasuke and deep down he loves me too."

"Really and where is your evidence of this?"

"I don't need evidence!" Sakura insisted. "I just know it."

"I see." Shino replied. "Very well, clearly my effort here was wasted." He turned to leave. "I will meet you on the practice field at 3 as our sensei instructed."

She stood there and watched him go. "Aren't you worried I'll tell Sasuke what you said to me?"

Shino looked back at her and though it was hard to tell she thought he might have looked surprised. "Sakura, I spoke to Sasuke about this same matter before coming to your home."

"You did?"

He nodded. "Of course, unlike you I concern myself with following the dictates of logic rather than emotions. I advised him of my conclusions and my belief that you should not be a couple."

"Did he get angry and threaten you?" She was worried. She didn't want the team torn apart by this.

"No. He was not upset in the least. He informed me that I could make whatever argument I liked, that nothing I could say would cause you to give up your attachment to him." Shino paused. "I will admit he certainly understood you better than I did." With that Shino departed.

*He didn't fight for me? He didn't even get angry?* She told herself that was a good decision. Sasuke had been confident in her love for him and had not even been worried about losing her. But it still bothered her that her boyfriend wouldn't at least get angry when someone suggested he was just using her. It bothered her a great deal more than she was willing to admit even to herself.

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"What do you think all that was about on the second floor?" Hinata asked.

"Well that genjutsu had to be some sort of test." Naruto said. "They must be trying to separate out the really weak teams all ready." He shrugged. "I mean if you can't even figure out what floor you're on you shouldn't be taking the test to begin with."

Hinata was frowning a bit. "Don't you think we should have told them about the genjutsu though?"

Naruto shook his head. "No. This is a competition now. It's team seven versus everyone else. We shouldn't try and help out the other squads. I mean it's a test after all not a real battle."

Kiba chuckled. "I'm not so sure about that. From what my mom and my older sister tell me these exams can get pretty rough."

Naruto smiled. "All the more reason not to help the competition."

"But aren't you even worried about Lee? He seemed to be in bad shape." Hinata asked. Naruto laughed. "What?"

He turned to her clasped his hands together and did a fair impression of Lee's earnest tone. "'Oh pleaaaaasse let us through! We are soooo helpless and weak! I mean even though my teammate happens to be a Hyuga with the byakugan we have noooo idea there's a genjutsu here.'" He laughed and this time Hinata and Kiba joined in. "I suspect Lee's team will be fine. He was probably just play acting to convince the other teams his squad was weak."

"But Naruto-kun what do we do if some of our friends are in trouble?" Hinata asked worriedly.

Naruto looked to both his teammates. "If our friends are in serious danger of getting killed or even hurt we'll help. But we're not going out of our way to help them pass. The whole point of this is to see which teams are strong enough to deserve to be promoted. If other squads aren't strong enough yet they'll just need to keep working at it."

"I guess that's fair Naruto-kun." Hinata said.

As they approached room three oh one there was Kakashi leaning against the wall. "Hey niisan you come to wish us good luck?"

Kakashi nodded. "That and to remind you one final time to be very careful of your opponents some of them may play rough."

Naruto had a big smile. "I say bring it on! Team seven is ready!"

"Damn straight!" Kiba agreed. Hinata simply smiled and nodded.

Kakashi chuckled. "Well what are you waiting for? Go get 'em!"

"Yeah!" he gave each of his teammates an excited look. "Let's do it team!" Plunging forward Naruto pressed open the double doors and



led the way.

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He remembered from his academy days that 301 was a large room. He hadn't expected it to be quite this full though. There were a lot of shinobi here and many of them were from foreign villages. He did a quick scan of the room to see if he could spot the red haired kid from Sand. He was definitely someone to watch out for. And it was as he was standing there that he was brutally ambushed from behind.

"Naruto-kun!" He had no chance to dodge before Ino had glomped onto his back. "Hey cutie where have you been? I've missed you!"

"Ino! Get off Naruto-kun right now!" Hinata shouted.

Ino stuck her tongue out. "I'm going to make Naruto-kun mine."

Naruto sighed and turned to the girl who was attached to his back. "Ino I'm in love with Hinata-chan, the most we will ever be is friends. And if you keep trying to ambush me we won't be that."

She let go and dropped to the floor. Smiling she put a hand on his arm. "Naruto-kun if you would just give me one chance..."

"I'd still be in love with Hinata-chan that is never going to change." He put his arms around her, partly to hold her and partly to keep her from going up to Ino. "I love Hinata-chan and only Hinata-chan."

"So leave Naruto-kun alone." Hinata hissed and tried to pull out of Naruto's grasp.

"Ino are you being troublesome again?" Shikamaru approached with a lazy look. Trailing behind him was Chouji, a bag of chips in his hands.

"Shut up you lazy jerk!" Ino barked at him.

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. "Hey Naruto, Hinata, Kiba, it has been awhile."

"Hey Shika, say don't take this the wrong way, but why did Asuma nominate your team for the exams? I mean from what I've heard your work ethic hasn't improved much."

Shikamaru shrugged. "I don't really know, maybe he lost a bet."

"Shut up!" Ino immediately slammed the top of his head. "Actually Naruto-kun as leader of team ten I've whipped these boys into shape. We're a smooth fighting unit!"

Seeing Chouji continue to munch on chips and Shikamaru slouch away disinterested Naruto had his doubts.

The door opened and some more familiar faces entered.

"Lady Hinata and Naruto-san I greet you." Neji said in his usual condescending tone.

"Hey, you forgetting somebody?" Kiba spoke up.

"Nobody important." Neji walked into the room followed closely by Tenten.

"What?!" Kiba shouted but both Hinata and Naruto were able to restrain him.

Lee came up to them looking a bit happier than usual. "Naruto-san, Hinata-san, and Kiba-san it is good to see all of you again."

Naruto smiled. "Hey Lee I caught your performance downstairs, very amusing."

Lee nodded vigorously. "Part of a ninja's arsenal is deception. If others believe us to be weaker than we are we can put that to good advantage."

Naruto nodded. "Oh I agree!" Naruto chuckled. "I give you credit in fact. I don't think I'd ever try to make myself look weaker." Naruto couldn't help but notice the odd look in his friend's eyes. "You seem really revved up for this thing."

Lee had a silly grin on his face. "Naruto-san I have fallen in love!"

"Oh Lee that's wonderful!" Hinata said and gave her friend a quick hug.

Naruto smiled. "Yeah that's great! You're an awesome guy whoever this girl is she really lucked out. So who is the lucky girl?"

Lee sighed. "She is the most amazing and wondrous angel with a melodious voice, kind and gentle heart, and beautiful forehead."

"Forehead?" Naruto got a very bad feeling. Like he was watching his friend about to go skipping off the edge of a cliff. "Oh Lee, *please* tell me this girl didn't have pink hair!"

"Yes! Yes she did!" Lee said excitedly. "Do you know her Naruto-san? Do you know Sakura-san?"

Naruto began to rub his temples. "You might say that. I spent four *wonderful* years with her as a classmate." His strongest memory of the girl would always be of her throwing that blood onto Hinata. "Lee please take my word for it when I say you don't want to go there. She has been in love with that stuck up Uchiha Sasuke forever. Please believe me when I say you don't have a chance with her."

Lee frowned. "Naruto-san how can you say that? I have sworn to protect her with my life! I will one day win over her sweet and gentle heart."

The door opened and in walked the members of team eight. Naruto immediately noticed a large bruise forming on Sasuke's face. Sakura seemed to be wanting to heal him but an unhappy Sasuke was holding her off. Shino was trailing his two teammates by a few feet

as they entered. Sakura immediately spotted Lee and began shaking a fist at him. "You bushy browed freak! How dare you do that to Sasuke-kun!"

Sasuke sent her a sharp look. "Shut up Sakura!" The girl stiffened and immediately began to apologize.

"Sweet and gentle heart huh?" Naruto commented dryly.

Lee was frowning. "I do not like the way Sasuke spoke to Sakura-san."

"He is usually not quite that bad." Naruto admitted. He had long since stopped caring why Sakura let herself be walked on the way she did. Naruto sent his thick browed friend a smile. "Lee? Did you put that bruise on Sasuke's face?"

Lee nodded. "I wanted to test myself against one of the elite Uchihas." He frowned. "My sensei ended the match before it could be concluded, but I must say I was not impressed by the performance."

Sasuke heard all this of course and seethed. It was bad enough to have lost matches against Naruto and Hinata. But at least he had a Hokage's blood in his veins while she was a master of gentle fist and heir of the elite Hyuga clan. Lee was *nothing* !! He was a complete loser who couldn't even mold chakra! Losing to him was a complete and utter disgrace. *I'm an Uchiha and I have my sharingan now. How could I lose to a weak link like that? How can I ever get enough power to destroy Naruto and Itachi?*

"Hey you kids might want to settle down! These are the Chunin exams not a trip to the playground." A silver haired Leaf nin approached them. He looked to be a teen.

"Who the hell are you?" Kiba scowled.

"My name's Kabuto. Let me guess you kids are all fresh out of the academy aren't you? You're all wet behind the ears and really think you know everything don't you?"

Naruto frowned, really not liking this guy and his attitude. "Who we are is none of your business."

The young teen with glasses smiled at him. "Hey, no need to get upset with me. I'm actually trying to do you all a favor. A lot of these candidates are wound up very tight and the last thing they want is to have to listen to a bunch of loud academy graduates carrying on. Take it from someone who has been here before, you don't want to start off getting on a lot of people's nerves."

"How many times have you been here Kabuto-san?" Hinata asked politely.

"This is my seventh try. I've gone twice a year since I graduated."

Sasuke's ears picked up. "I'll bet you know a few things about these exams then."

Kabuto nodded "You might say that."

Sasuke gave him a well practiced smile. "Care to help out your fellow Leaf nins? After all we're all just helpless little wet behind the ears kids fresh out of the academy."

Kabuto chuckled. "Cute. All right I'll take some pity on you poor babies." He pulled out a stack of cards. "These are my shinobi skill cards. They're where I've placed all the information I've gathered over the past four years." He flipped some of them.

"I guess you haven't gathered *that* much information." Naruto commented. "All those are blank."

Kabuto nodded. "The information is hidden until I use my own personal chakra to reveal it." He set one card down and put a finger

on top of it. The card spun about for a bit and then revealed information about the number of teams participating and their home villages.

Sasuke looked at the card with only mild interest. "Do you have dossier cards for individual applicants?"

Kabuto nodded. "Certainly, though my collection is far from complete. Tell me who you're interested in and I'll see what I can do."

"Show me whatever you have on Rock Lee and Namikaze Naruto; both from this village."

Kabuto began to shuffle through his cards. "You know their names and villages? That makes it too easy!" He pulled two blank cards from his deck.

Naruto looked at Sasuke and grinned at him. Lee had already gone to rejoin his team. "Gee Sasuke after four years together don't you know me well enough already?" Sasuke sent him a frown but said nothing.

Kabuto placed one of the cards down and touched it with his finger. It spun for a bit and then stopped revealing its information. "First off we have Rock Lee. Let's see now, he has completed 20 D-rank and 11 C-rank missions. His sensei is Might Guy and this is his first trip to the exams. He has some significant ability in taijutsu but he seems to have nothing of ninjutsu or genjutsu."

Sasuke was disappointed. That information didn't help at all.

Kabuto put the other card down. "Now let's take a look at Namikaze Naruto." Kabuto looked up and smiled at the blonde. Like everyone else in Konoha he knew who he was. "Well now, 53 D-ranks, 6 C-ranks, and whoa, an A-rank?" Kabuto looked up from the card. "How did you manage to land an A-rank straight out of the academy? Those missions are normally reserved for Jonins."

Naruto smiled. "What can I say? It started out as a C and got an upgrade."

Sasuke sent Naruto a dark look. Team eight had gotten its first C-rank about two weeks after team seven. Their mission had been to protect a merchant caravan traveling to the village hidden in the grass. They had actually been attacked by some bandits one night. It was during that fight that his sharingan had activated. Team eight did a great job in defeating the bandits and completed the mission successfully. Kurenai-sensei had been extremely proud of all of them and they had returned to the village in glory. Then the very next day team seven had come back and all anyone wanted to talk about was the fact that they had faced Momochi Zabuza and survived. Sasuke had no doubt that it was Kakashi that did all the fighting. But their sensei's glory had reflected onto all of them and once again Sasuke could feel Naruto casting him into the shadows.

"Whoa check this out!" Kabuto sounded really impressed.

"What?" Sasuke asked unhappily. *Did he do an S-rank too while I wasn't looking?*

Kabuto looked up at Naruto with real surprise. "Did you know someone has you in their Bingo book?"

"Really?" Naruto said excitedly. Ordinary ninja did not go in the Bingo book. That was reserved for ninjas who were seen as especially dangerous or skilled. "Who?"

"The village hidden among the rocks, and they have you listed as an A-rank opponent."

Naruto laughed and had a huge grin. "Hear that guys? I'm famous!"

"Naruto-kun," Hinata said with worry. "This isn't a *good* thing!"

He took her hand and spoke to her reassuringly. "It's all right Hinata-chan. I can't be Hokage unless I'm acknowledged the best ninja in

this village. I was always bound to end up in all of them sooner or later. It's a compliment that I'm in one now."

"But why would the Rock nins of all people have you listed?" Kiba wondered.

"I have a pretty good guess." Naruto said but did not go into details.

As team seven moved off a bit Sasuke remained where he was. His eyes were shut; his fists were clenched and shaking. *How! How does he keep surpassing me?! He's not even six months out of the academy and he's in a Bingo book? He's leaving me far behind! I'm too weak and too ordinary!*

"Sasuke-kun are you..."

"Leave me alone Sakura." He said sharply. She quickly nodded and backed away from him.

Kabuto gathered up his cards and stood up. He didn't fail to notice the poor little boy's upset at finding out his classmate was more special than him. "Are you all right?" He asked in a cheerful tone.

Sasuke looked up at him. "I need more power." He said desperately.

Kabuto grinned. "Well don't we all? I doubt you'll find a single ninja in this room who doesn't want more power."

"No," Sasuke said harshly. "I don't *want* more power. I *need* more power. There are things I have to do and I can't do them unless I become a lot more powerful than I am." He looked at Kabuto pleadingly. "Do you know of any way I can acquire *a lot* of power quickly?"

"If I did do you think I'd be taking this exam for the seventh time?"

Sasuke turned around. "It doesn't matter I'll find a way. I'll do whatever I have to."



A certain light came into Kabuto's eyes upon hearing those words. His main job since graduating the academy had been intelligence gathering and recruitment for his Lord. His master was always looking for potential followers with the right mind set. Over the past four years Kabuto had sent many young kids on their way north to the Sound village.

*He's much too old. Normally I get them before they enter the academy. But he's an Uchiha and that makes up for a lot. This might be interesting.* "You know Sasuke there are ways to acquire power quickly." The boy immediately halted and looked back at him. "But everything comes with a price. And the kind of power you're talking about comes with a very high price. Are you really sure you want power *that* badly?"

Sasuke nodded without hesitation. "What do I have to do?"

It was then the instructors arrived with a large puff of smoke. "All right everyone! Sorry to have kept you waiting. I am Morino Ibiki and I am the proctor for the first part of the exam."

Kabuto smiled and waved good bye. "We'll talk again later."

Sasuke wanted to grab him but people were starting to get up on their feet and shuffle forward. Things were starting. He decided there was no choice and rejoined his squad.

Ibiki had the students draw numbers and sat them down at random through out the room. He then explained his rules for the test. Naruto was very surprised to learn that the first part of the Chunin exams would be a written test. From what he'd heard he'd expected some form of combat. Instead Ibiki told them that if they were caught cheating five times they would fail. That got his immediate attention. He had never taken a test that would not fail you immediately if you were caught cheating even once. *Why would they let you cheat up to four times and still pass? Then he chuckled. Oh, it's not really a test of our intelligence at all is it? It's a test of our intelligence gathering skills. Hmm, Hinata with her byakugan will be fine if she even needs*

*to use it. Kiba will manage too I bet. He and Akamaru are pretty sneaky.* Naruto frowned when he thought of himself. His forte was fighting not intelligence gathering.

"You have one hour beginning... now!" Ibiki said.

Naruto turned the sheet over and looked at question one. *Cryptography huh?* He smiled. He'd been decoding since he was seven. Taking a quick look at the other questions he didn't see anything that was especially hard. *Too bad Ibiki it looks like I don't even need to cheat to pass your test.* There were only nine questions actually listed. The tenth question would not be given until there were only fifteen minutes left. He wasn't worried about that. If he could get eight or nine right that would probably be plenty to help get his team through. He took care of the questions he had in front of him and then relaxed. As he sat there he watched as team, after team got tossed out. No one he knew got tossed and he was glad to see the herd being thinned a bit.

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"All right," Ibiki called out. "It is now time for me to give you the tenth question."

Ibiki gave them all a cold and calculating look. "Now before I give you the final question you must first decide whether or not you wish to reject the question."

"What do you mean reject the question?" A Grass nin spoke up.

"I mean you must choose whether or not you wish to be given the question. Should you choose to reject the question then you immediately forfeit all your points and fail with your teammates failing right along with you."

"Then why would anyone reject the question?" An adult Leaf nin asked.

"Because of the final rule. Should you accept the question and get it wrong then not only do you and your teammates still fail but **you will never be permitted to take it again** ."

The room exploded like a bomb had gone off. "That's ridiculous!" Kiba shouted from his feet. "I know for a fact that there are ninja here who have taken the exam before!"

Ibiki chuckled. "It's just your rotten luck. I wasn't the one making the rules then, but I am now. Any of you who reject the question now can take the exam again in six months. But if you take the question and get it wrong you and your teammates will die as Genin even if you live to be a hundred and fifty. Now make your choice."

The ninja all began to look at one another. Naruto turned in his seat. Sure enough both Hinata and Kiba were looking at him nervously. He was the team leader and they trusted him to make the decision. He smiled and held out a thumbs up. They both nodded and sat back. Naruto turned around to patiently wait.

A number of squads decided to reject the question and leave with heads hanging. Finally Ibiki looked them all over again. "Anyone else want to reject the question? This is your very last chance." He paused and waited, but no one raised a hand. "Very well," he called out in a strong voice. "All of those who are still here," he paused dramatically savoring the moment. "All pass the first phase of this exam. Congratulations!"

Naruto let out a sigh of relief. Just as with the bell test from Kakashi or the rules about cheating here he had needed to look underneath the underneath. The idea that the various kages would be bound by the decision of a proctor from the Leaf village had seemed a bit far fetched. But as with Kakashi's lies during the bell test he hadn't been *completely* sure. But in the end the decision hadn't really been that hard. He had faith in himself and in his squad mates.

"Look out!" Someone shouted.

Naruto turned his head just in time to see something smash through the window. About a minute later a woman in a trench coat, mini skirt, and fishnet was standing in front of them. "None of you are in any position to celebrate!" The bizarre looking kunoichi called out. "I am Mitarashi Anko, proctor for the second phase of these exams. All right all of you on your feet! Let's move it on out!"

The candidates all just sat there staring at her.

Ibiki sighed. "Can't you sense the mood in here?"

Anko frowned and did a quick head count. "Ibiki! There are still sixty of them! You passed twenty teams?" Her disbelief was all for show this was about the number she'd expected.

Ibiki shrugged. "What can I tell you? We had some outstanding candidates this time."

"Hah! I'll cut their numbers down by at least half by the time I'm done! Now get up off your asses and follow me you're all going straight to phase two. I hope you're all well rested because I doubt you'll be getting much sleep anytime soon."

"Where are we going?" A short Grass nin in a straw hat asked.

Anko smiled. "Oh to a cheery little spot we Leaf nins call special training ground number 44." She chuckled happily. "Also known as the Forest of Death."

## Forest of death

**Author's note:** Merry Christmas everyone. Please consider this chapter my gift to all of you! (seriously hoping you're getting something better.)

Hinata saw Naruto waiting for her by the fireplace. "Hello Naruto-kun, why did you want me to come over?"

He smiled happily. "Hinata-chan, it's December 25th today!"

She looked at him blankly. "So?"

"It's Christmas!" he said excitedly

She smiled and giggled a bit. "Oh silly! This is a fictional world, we don't celebrate Christmas here."

"We don't?" He looked crestfallen. "So I guess you don't want my present?"

"You got me a present?" Hinata said excitedly. Nodding a bit embarrassed he handed her a little chibi fox with nine tails. "Kawaii! Oh I love it! Thank you Naruto-kun!" She hugged him and he gladly hugged her back.

As he hugged his girlfriend in front of the roaring fireplace he noticed his mom with her head in the room smiling at the two of them mischievously. "Mom stop spying on us!"

She laughed. "It's called protective surveillance son, and the two of you really are just too cute! I'll have some cookies ready in a minute."

He shook his head. Then he smiled at the 'other' girl he loved. "Merry Christmas Hinata-chan."

Giggling she leaned forward and gave him a kiss. "Merry Chrsitmas Naruto-kun."

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Twenty teams were gathered before a thirty foot high metal fence. Behind that fence was a wooded terrain that seemed gloomy and twisted. The landscape seemed completely alien to any he had seen in Konoha before. *Funny how mom and niisan never mentioned this place to me.* Naruto thought. As the teams waited Anko started to explain what was in store for them.

"All right! Now listen up you maggots because I'm not going to explain this twice. The very first thing we'll need to do is have each and every one of you sign one of these consent forms." She smiled at them in a slightly blood thirsty manner. "They clear us of any liability should you be killed or terribly maimed. I mean you wouldn't want me getting in trouble now would you?" She laughed. No one else there seemed to think it funny. "Now I'll explain what the second phase entails and then you can sign your forms and turn them in to the little hut behind me. To put it simply the second phase will be a no holds barred survival test. Within this training ground is a tower located roughly fifteen miles from all of the gates. The training ground also contains forest, a river, and all sorts of wild animals. Within this training ground you're going to go through a survival test. You are free to use any weapons, jutsus or tactics at your disposal. The test is a fight to the death version of, 'capture the flag' or in this case, 'capture the scroll.'" From out of her pockets she produced two scrolls. "There is a, 'scroll of heaven' and a, 'scroll of earth.' Your goal is to acquire both. There are twenty teams here. Half of you will receive the earth scroll to begin with and half will get the heaven scroll. So your goal is to hold on to your own scroll, capture the other from an opposing team, and bring both to the tower in the center."

"So no more than ten teams can possibly pass this test?" Sakura spoke up.

Anko nodded. "That's right. Now there are some conditions. First there's a time limit. You have exactly one hundred and twenty hour to

accomplish your goal and reach the tower with both scrolls."

"That's five days!" Chouji shouted. "What are we supposed to do for food?"

"That's your problem. The forest is filled with nature's bounty. Of course it's also filled with poisonous plants, man eating monsters, and enemies. Sleep tight. Second only a full three man squad can complete the assignment. Any squad with a member killed or rendered incapacitated fails. And third you may not open the scrolls until you have reached the tower. As Chunin you will often be trusted with top secret documents. Consider this a test of your reliability."

"What happens if we open them before we get to the tower?" Kiba asked.

She smiled. "That's for those who open them to know. All right, that's all the explanation you get. Now turn in your consent forms at the hut there. We'll exchange a heaven or earth scroll for three consent forms. Then we will take each squad to a different gate. You will all begin at the same time and at the same distance from the tower. Oh, and one final piece of advice." She looked them all over. "Just don't die!"

"Charming." Naruto muttered.

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Ino looked at her two boys and tried to encourage them. "All right this is it team ten! This is going to a brutal desperate fight where everyone we run into will be an enemy out to attack us. Now what are we going to do?!" She waited for them to shout, 'fight' loudly and in unison.

"Hide?" Chouji suggested.

"Quit." Shikamaru offered.

Ino buried her head in her hands and screamed.

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"We will set up a base camp and acquire food and water." Neji said.  
"We will then go on the offensive after dark when the other teams are likely to be resting."

"Roger!" Lee confirmed.

"Right!" Tenten agreed.

Neji nodded. His team would do well.

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Kabuto and his two, 'teammates' waited by their gate in silence.

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"Shino I'm counting on you and your little friends to be our eyes."

"Of course." Shino said with his usual lack of feeling.

"Sakura I want you to stay by my side at all times."

She nodded eagerly. "Of course Sasuke-kun."

Sasuke felt as excited as he had fighting those bandits in his first real combat. He had a little bit of a smile as he anticipated a real challenge.

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Dosu looked to Kin and Zaku. "You understand what the mission goal is right?" He said quietly.

Kin nodded and Zaku smirked. "This is going to be so much fun."  
Zaku said eagerly.

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Naruto looked at his teammates. "All right the longer we stay in this place the more beaten up we're going to get. We need an earth scroll. Let's find someone who has what we need, get it from them,



and get to the tower. Kiba, with your sense of smell you can pick up teams in the area. Hinata-chan with your byakugan we can spot anything coming for a two mile radius. You can also check to make sure whoever we attack has what we need. There's no point fighting any useless battles." He looked where the sun was. "All right there are maybe two hours of sunlight left in the day. Let's try and get done before night."

Kiba nodded. "Sounds good to me. We can get first dibs on the rooms in the tower."

"If we do this right we can probably surprise whoever we run up against." Hinata pointed out.

Naruto nodded. "Let's make this as quick and easy as we can."

---

The signal was given and twenty three man teams raced into the battle zone.

Thirty minutes after entering Kiba picked up a scent. Hinata quickly focused in on the team. "They have an earth scroll!" Hinata said excitedly. "They're on the ground about a mile and a half north of us."

"All right team time to get a full set." He gave them a rough idea of what he had in mind and they moved.

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"That was too easy!" Zaku complained.

Dosu chuckled "It was wasn't it?" Around them were the dead bodies of three adult Leaf nins.

"Do you want to go picking through their corpses to get their scroll?" Kin asked.

"Why bother?" Dosu asked. "We're not even close to being done with our mission yet. Our Lord wants us to eliminate as many Leaf nins

as possible under the guise of this exam. These three won't fight in the upcoming battle. But there are plenty more to be picked off."

Zaku frowned. "The other Leaf teams are all made of children. As pathetic as the adults were killing the brats won't even be much fun. It'll be way too easy."

"That hardly matters." Dosu replied. "The important thing is that we fulfill our Lord's command as best we can."

They were soon moving in search of another Leaf squad.

---

The three Rain ninjas suddenly came alert. They all had on respirators and had pulled out their kunai. A boy ninja dropped in among them. He had blonde hair and was wearing a black and red body suit. "Hi there!" The boy said happily.

"Who are you and where are your teammates?" One of the Rain nins asked.

"Well my name's Naruto and my teammates are sneaking up behind you."

The three Rain nins laughed. "You expect us to turn around for such a lame trick?"

Naruto smiled. "I wasn't talking about you three bushins. I was talking about your three real selves hiding in those bushes." He pointed to their hiding spot.

"What?!" One of the Rain nins cried out. Before they could move all three were slammed in the back of their heads.

Naruto, Kiba, and Hinata were standing over their unconscious opponents. Naruto smiled at his girlfriend. "Hinata-chan I ever tell you I love your kekkei genkai?"

She laughed. "Once or twice Naruto-kun." She bent over one of the ninjas and went through his coat. She quickly produced their prize. "Got it!" Hinata handed the earth scroll to Naruto who secured it to one of his pouches.

"All right! Now we go straight to the tower."

"Hey Naruto," Kiba spoke up. "Why don't we wait a little bit before we go to the tower?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean why don't we stay out here a couple more days and get some more scrolls?" Kiba smiled eagerly. "That way more teams will fail and our chances will improve!"

Naruto thought about it a moment but shook his head. "No, I think it's best that we go to the tower. I don't want to risk us getting hurt out here or worse."

"What are you talking about? We've already won a fight and we barely had to do anything!"

"Right, *this* time." Naruto pointed out. "Next time might be a different story. We've got what we need. We've accomplished the mission objective now we just need to finish up the mission and get to the tower."

"What are you worried about? We're the best!" Kiba exclaimed.

Naruto nodded. "I agree team seven is the best. But that doesn't mean we should go looking for trouble when we don't have to. Even if we get some more scrolls how much does it really help? Some other teams are bound to get through no matter what we do. This phase is going to last five days. But nothing says the next phase won't happen right after. The way this one started right after the first phase ended. I don't want us going into the next round beaten up and hurting. Let's take the next five days to just relax and get ready."

Kiba shrugged giving up. "Fine."

---

"All right," Neji spoke. "We've set up a base camp and acquired food and water. Let's split up and scout the area. But whatever you find be back here in one hour." He tossed kunai into the earth.

"Yes Neji!" Lee said.

"Got it!" Tenten said excitedly.

Neji grinned a bit. "Go!" The three of them disappeared.

---

Kiba picked something up and held up a fist. Team seven came to a halt. "What is it?" Naruto asked.

"There are six scents coming from up ahead." Kiba informed him.

"Hinata-chan?"

Hinata nodded. "Byakugan." She scanned the way for a bit. "I see them, two teams. It looks like they're going to fight. Naruto, one of them are the group we met in the alleyway with Konohamaru."

"So the red haired kid, Gaara is there?"

"Yes." She nodded.

Naruto paused to think about it. "All right, let's go take a look."

"What?" Hinata turned to him. "I thought you wanted to avoid any more fights."

"I do." He said seriously. "We're going there to scout not fight. I want to see what this Gaara can do."

"How come?" Kiba asked.

"I don't know." Naruto admitted. "But I have this nasty little feeling that I'll be seeing him again and I want to find out as much as I can about him."

---

They landed in some thick bushes about a hundred yards away. As soon as they landed Akamaru began to whine and swiftly crawled into Kiba's jacket.

"What's wrong with him?" Naruto whispered.

Kiba frowned and looked a bit concerned. "He can sense an opponent's chakra. The fact he's this scared is a bad sign." He looked out onto the field. "That Rain ninja there must be pretty powerful."

"No," Naruto spoke with certainty. "It's the red haired kid, he's the one."

Kiba frowned. "You sure? He doesn't look like much."

Naruto grinned a bit. "Looks can be deceiving. / don't look that tough."

Kiba chuckled. "You've got a point."

From their well covered vantage point they watched the battle proceed. Saw the lead rain ninja launch an attack with thousands of needles only to be completely stopped by a dome of sand. They saw the frustrated nin foolishly try to rush in only to be trapped in the sand and lifted up off the ground. Gaara casually picked up a discarded parasol.

"What is he doing?" Hinata asked nervously.

"He's going to kill him." Naruto said. He'd seen Gaara's expression, he knew.

"Kill him? But the guy's helpless." Kiba argued.

"Yeah." Naruto agreed.

Gaara made a fist and the rain nin was crushed. His blood showered down onto the ground. They then watched as the two remaining rain ninjas surrendered their scroll and asked to be allowed to leave. They were killed as quickly and as brutally as their friends had been.

"What the hell?" Kiba gasped.

"He didn't have to do that." Hinata whispered.

Naruto simply continued to watch. As the guy in the black pajamas picked up the scroll Gaara turned in the direction where they were hiding.

"He knows we're here." Naruto said calmly.

"What?!" Hinata said.

"Oh hell!" Kiba spoke in near panic.

---

"Gaara!"

He turned and looked with annoyance at his so called brother.

"What?"

"Didn't you hear what I said? We have the heaven scroll we needed. Now we can go straight to the tower. The sooner we're out of here the better." Kankuro noticed that Gaara was staring into the woods. Gaara was never the most stable of people and Kankuro was wondering what was going on. "Something wrong Gaara?"

"Gaara," Temari spoke carefully and gently. "We're done here. We should get going."

Gaara smiled a bit. They were both relieved to see it *wasn't* one of his blood thirsty smiles. They were even more relieved to see the sand returning to its gourd. He was looking back at the woods when he spoke. "I'll save you for later."

"What?' Temari asked.

Gaara turned to his siblings as he put the cork into the gourd's opening. "Let's go."

---

As they watched the blonde girl and the other boy leapt away. Still looking in their direction Gaara gave a slight bow before leaping away as well.

"Oh man he really knew!" Kiba let out a relieved breath.

Hinata's heart was pounding. "Naruto-kun what's wrong?" He was just sitting there looking blankly into the clearing.

He turned and gave her a weak smile. "I'm o.k. Hinata-chan. We'll wait here for thirty minutes before we continue to the tower. No reason to risk running into them on the way there."

His teammates both nodded eagerly. "I don't know what that guy's story is." Kiba said. "But he's deadly."

Naruto said nothing but sat there and thought.

---

As the Sound ninjas landed in the clearing the children faced them. Dosu laughed as one of them tried to look fierce, their leader obviously. "Didn't your mother ever warn you about going to dangerous places?" As Dosu watched the boys eyes turned red.

"Didn't yours?" Sasuke readied his kunai and signaled Sakura and Shino.

Zaku stepped forward. "Enough chit chat." He raised his arms. "**Super Sonic Air Slice.**" And fired off a wave of destructive power. The ground where the three had been standing was torn apart. When the dust cleared there was nothing left.

"Hah! Too easy! Blew those wimps away!"

Dosu eyed the scene. There was nothing left. Not even any blood or remains. "Wait a minute!"

A fireball leapt out of a tree. It hit right in the middle of their group and each sound ninja was forced to leap in a different direction. Sasuke quickly turned to his teammates. "I'll get the mummy, Sakura tackle the girl, Shino take the other guy, move!" The three members of team eight leapt out of the tree and into battle.

Dosu was on his feet as Sasuke came flying in. He quickly got his right arm to block a kick aimed at his head. "How did you know we were coming?" Dosu asked.

Sasuke smirked at him. "My teammate had his little friends keeping watch."

"Little friends?" But Sasuke's only answer was a stream of fire that forced Dosu to run.

Shino landed a single punch on his opponent. He then quickly leapt back away from him and into the underbrush.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Zaku fired off a blast from one arm. It toppled a tree but missed his enemy.

"Your aim leaves much to be desired." Shino said calmly. And leapt back further into the woods.

"You're not getting away!" Zaku followed him into the woods.

Kin threw some needles as Sakura closed in on her. She managed to avoid them and created four bushins as she rushed on. Kin



backed up and fired more needles. The bushin were all eliminated but the real Sakura landed a solid punch on her chin knocking her down.

"Surrender!" Sakura shouted as she stood over the older girl with a drawn kunai.

"Stupid girl!" With a sweep of her legs she knocked Sakura over. Grabbing a kunai she leapt on top of Sakura and tried to drive the blade into her chest. "You think this is a game?" Kin shouted at her. "I'm going to kill you!"

Sakura caught Kin's right hand by the wrist. But Kin was sitting on her chest and had the advantage of leverage. She leaned forward and put both hands into driving her kunai down. Sakura had both her hands trying to stop it but the kunai was slowly being driven towards her heart. *This is really bad!* Sakura thought in panic.

Sasuke went straight in. Dosu took a wild swing at him. Being able to read his movements with the sharingan Sasuke had no problem at all avoiding the punch.

"You're too slow to hit me." Sasuke informed him.

"I don't need to hit you." Dosu replied.

And as Dosu's gauntleted fist swung past he felt a small tremor go through him. He suddenly began to vomit. He also lost his sense of balance and was only just able to stay on his feet.

"You're mine now!" Dosu clocked him on the jaw and sent him flying back.

Zaku came to a halt and looked desperately about. How could he have let that other ninja get away from him? He noticed more damn bugs on his sleeves and brushed them off again. For some reason this part of the forest seemed to be infested with bugs. They didn't bite so they were just a nuisance, but still...

His opponent with the high collar jacket and shades stepped out from behind a tree and began coming towards him. "You are beaten." He said stoically.

Zaku laughed. "What world do you live in?" With the idiot coming straight at him he had him lined up perfectly. He lifted both arms to fire his waves... only to have nothing happen. "What the?!"

Shino caught him with a kick to the side of the head which sent him down. "I am a bug master. While you have been chasing me I have had my insects planted in you draining you of your chakra. So you see that..." Shino noticed his opponent was now unconscious so further explanation was superfluous. He got out some rope to tie him up so he could return to his teammates.

Despite all she could do the tip of the kunai was now pressing into her skin. Sakura was about to scream out when she saw a flash of green and the girl was suddenly off her. "What?"

"Sakura-san are you all right?"

She stared up at the oh so strange boy she had only met a few hours ago. "Lee?! What are you doing here?"

He smiled at her and held up a thumb. "Sakura-san I swore I would give my life to protect you! Fate has brought me here to aid you in your time of need!"

He was strange and bizarre and actually claimed to be in love with her. But she couldn't deny he really had saved her life. "Thank you Lee! Truly thank you!"

He seemed to blush a bit and gave her an actual bow. "Sakura-san I am only glad I was here to be of assistance."

She saw that Sasuke was in trouble. "Lee can you help Sasuke please?"

He frowned on hearing that, but quickly nodded. "Since you ask it Sakura-san then of course I will." He swiftly loosened the bandages around his arms.

It was all Sasuke could do to avoid being hit again. His sharingan showed him where the punches were coming but his lack of balance was making him seriously clumsy and slow.

Suddenly there was a green blur circling Dosu.

"Please stand back Sasuke and I will deal with your enemy." He wasn't sure what was going on but he never the less backed away.

Lee caught Dosu with a perfect kick to his chin and sent him into the air. Leaping up after him he came up behind and wrapped him tight in his bandages.

"What are you doing?" A panicked Dosu asked.

"I am ending this fight." He began to spiral downward. " **Forward Lotus Technique.**"

Sasuke and Sakura both watched as the sound nin was slammed into the earth with Lee leaping away at the last possible moment. It was certainly an impressive way to end the fight.

---

Sasuke found that the mummy had the earth scroll they needed. Shino had returned and they could now make their way to the tower. That is once Lee got done bothering Sakura.

Sakura gave him a happy smile. "Thank you again Lee-kun! I know you didn't owe us anything but your help made the difference. You're an amazing ninja!" With that she leaned in and gave him a quick kiss on his cheek.

The boy blushed like a virgin girl. "Sakura-san I will always be there to protect you when you need me!" He smiled and held out his

thumb. "It's a promise!"

"Thank you Lee-kun, and I think you can call me Sakura-chan."

He let out a sigh of pure delight. "Thank you Sakura-chan! But now I must return to my team! I am sure I will see you at the tower." He gave her a bow and leapt away.

Sasuke approached her. "What was that?"

"Huh?" She looked at him in surprise. Sasuke was definitely looking the worse for wear. He still had a large bruise on his face from earlier, his clothes were torn, and he was dirty and sweaty. But most unusual of all he actually seemed to be upset. "What do you mean?"

He frowned at her. "What was the idea of letting him call you chan and *kissing* him?"

"He saved my life Sasuke." She answered calmly. "I think that deserves a kiss on the cheek and my letting him call me chan."

"Well I don't like him! I would have done fine against the mummy without any help and I don't like seeing him near you!" He sounded hot.

Sakura stared at him. She couldn't remember ever seeing him so upset. "I kissed his cheek Sasuke, Lee is no more than a friend. You are my boyfriend." A slow grin began to stretch across her face. "Are you *jealous* Sasuke?"

"Don't be ridiculous!" Sasuke snapped. "I have *nothing* to be jealous of!"

She laughed. "You are! You are jealous!" She sounded quite happy.

"O.k. we've got the scrolls we need let's get going." He leapt away and his teammates were forced to follow him.

As they leapt through the trees Sasuke tried to figure just what the hell it was he was feeling. When he'd seen Sakura kiss that thick browed freak he'd been surprised to actually be bothered by it. It wasn't jealousy of course. That was just not possible. No definitely not possible.

As they hurried towards the tower Sakura couldn't help but keep a smile on her face.

## Preliminaries

"It's been an interesting first day huh?" Anko asked.

"You could say that," her assistant chuckled. "We've already got three squads in and two of them broke the old record."

"Yeah, not to mention the little fact that two of them are rookie squads from here." She smirked. "It kind of makes you wonder what they're putting in the water at the academy."

"Whatever it is I want some."

"Get in line." She looked considering. "The squad from Suna made it here in just ninety seven minutes busting the old record by over four hours. The rookie squad with the Yondaime's son and the Hyuga heiress got in just forty minutes later. Then about four hours after that we got in the squad with the Uchiha and Aburame heirs." She shook her head. "And it's still just the first day."

"Makes you wonder how many squads will get through."

"Yeah, by the time the Hokage arrives it might be really interesting."

---

The tower in the middle of the forest was large and had plenty of rooms. Enough rooms that each participant was given a room of their very own. There was a cafeteria, a dojo, a courtyard, medical facilities, and even a pool. After opening their scrolls and having Iruka sensei impart his message and good wishes team seven had been given a quick tour, a hot meal, and assigned rooms. They were welcome to use the facilities and spend the next four and a half days as they pleased. There were only two rules. No leaving the tower grounds and no fighting with the other teams. They saw Gaara's unit and exchanged very frosty, very formal greetings. Naruto and Gaara had a slight staring contest but nothing came of it. They were outside

doing some light training in the courtyard when team eight arrived. They seemed a bit beaten up, especially Sasuke. Naruto and his team had actually tried to talk to them but Sasuke had gotten team eight moving with few words exchanged.

"Well some things never change." Naruto muttered.

"Perhaps they are just tired Naruto-kun." Hinata offered.

"Perhaps Sasuke is still as much of a jerk as ever." Naruto sighed.  
"Come on team, it's late let's get some sleep."

---

Late the following afternoon, to no ones surprise, Lee's team arrived. They were more social and agreed to sit down and have dinner with team seven. Team eight and the team from Suna remained aloof.

"You *saved* Sakura and Sasuke from some Sound ninjas?" Naruto was impressed.

"Yes Naruto-san! Kami was merciful and put me at the right place at right time to save my beloved Sakura-chan! She thanked me and even rewarded me with a kiss on the cheek!"

"Just a kiss on the cheek? Lee you saved the girl's life! You should go knock on her door tonight and ask for a *proper* reward!" Kiba hinted.

"Kiba!" Hinata sounded scandalized and Tenten sent him an annoyed look.

"Kiba-san I would never do such a thing!" Lee stood up and sounded righteous. "Please do not suggest such vile acts about my Sakura-chan!"

"Easy Lee, easy." Naruto motioned for him to relax. "Kiba is just having a little fun with you that's all." Lee sat back down and they continued to eat.

---

The next morning, to the shock of everyone from Konoha, team ten arrived.

"Shikamaru, Chouji, Ino how did you guys make it here?" Naruto asked truly surprised to see them.

Ino quickly did what she could to fix her hair. She also made a point to ignore Hinata's angry looks. "Naruto-kun I told you we were a great fighting squad! Under my leadership we used our superior stealth and took advantage of fortuitous events to successfully navigate the way here!"

"Huh?" Kiba asked not even pretending to understand.

Shikamaru translated. "We spent most of our time hiding from everyone. Then we stumbled on the bodies of some Leaf nins." He shook his head. "Whoever killed them didn't even bother to take their heaven scroll. Then we got here as fast and carefully as we could."

"So basically you succeeded by sheer luck without really trying?" Naruto said with a straight face.

"Pretty much." Shikamaru nodded.

"SHUT UP!" Ino began beating Shika to a pulp.

---

Late on the fourth day the Sound team made it in. It was easy to see there were still some hard feelings between them team eight and Lee.

---

On the morning of the fifth day the senseis all arrived.

"Yo."

Naruto smiled. "See niisan I told you we were ready!"



"Yeah we totally kicked ass!" Kiba confirmed.

"You've all done a great job to get this far and I am truly proud of you, but you're not quite through these woods yet."

Naruto sent him a flat look. "What does that mean?"

"Oh maybe something but maybe nothing." Kakashi said happily.

"You know what's coming up next don't you niisan?" Naruto accused.

"I have a strong suspicion." Kakashi confirmed.

"Tell us then!"

"No I don't think I will."

"What?! Why not?" Kiba shouted.

"Because I think it's good that you're nervous and paranoid and ready for anything." Kakashi said cheerfully. And from stance he could not be begged or threatened.

---

"Why are we here exactly?" Sasuke complained. Looking around all the members of the four leaf teams had come to the, 'meeting' Naruto has called in his room.

"I called this meeting because I want to share information with all of you." Naruto spoke seriously. "We're all competitors fighting for the same prize. But we are still all Leaf nins and I don't want any of you to be hurt or killed unnecessarily. I want to tell you what we saw the red haired kid, Gaara, on the sand team do." He then related the events in gruesome detail. "If any of you face him don't try to fight him. You should either runaway or try to surrender. I know all of your abilities and none of you would be able to defeat him."

"That is insulting!" Neji snapped.

"Neji," Tenten spoke. "Naruto is just trying to help."

"Perhaps you find the idea of being told you have no hope against an enemy acceptable. I do not!" He faced Naruto angrily. "Do you really expect me to run and hide just on your say so? The very idea is disgraceful!"

"Hey jerk Naruto is trying to save your life!" Kiba shouted.

"I am sorry Naruto-san." Lee spoke up. "But I must agree with Neji. I will not run away!"

"I certainly won't run." Sasuke said. "But I assume you will?"

"No." Naruto said quietly. "I think that of all of us here I'm the only one who can defeat him."

"Is that a fact?" Sasuke said darkly. "And why exactly are *you* the only one who can fight him?"

"Let's just say I have something inside me that you don't." Naruto and Sasuke locked gazes.

"Enough of this, was there anything else?" Neji asked.

"Not from me." Naruto smiled at Sasuke. "Care to share what you know about the Sound ninjas?"

"No." Sasuke said flatly.

"But Sasuke-kun Naruto just shared what he knew why shouldn't we help our friends?" Sakura said.

"Until this competition is over Sakura we have no friends only competitors." Sakura looked troubled by this but Neji nodded agreement. "Naruto did what he did for his own reasons. We don't owe him anything."

"I disagree." Said Shino. "I will share information with the rest of you."

Sasuke glared at him. "As team leader I say we keep everything locked up!"

Shino gave him a look. "It is clear you can order Sakura about like a puppet." Sakura flinched hearing that in front of everyone. "But you have no authority over me; you are not Kurenai-sensei. Logic suggests that your selfish actions will damage the good will we enjoy among our fellow Leaf nins. Not to mention the fact that we remain Leaf nins even now and doing what is best for the village should remain our priority even now. Therefore logic suggests that we are best served by sharing information."

Sasuke glared at the boy but Shino failed to notice and began telling everyone what he had learned both directly and from teammates.

---

No other teams arrived prior to the deadline.

"We have a total of six teams and eighteen competitors." Anko announced. "So as per the rules we shall have some preliminaries to cut the numbers down to something more manageable."

"I see." Tsunade said. "It's amazing that half the teams are rookie squads. Konoha should have some truly amazing ninja in its future." *And one very great Hokage.*

---

They were all gathered together in a large underground arena.

"Look Naruto the Hokage is here and all our senseis as well." Hinata pointed out.

He noticed the way Kakashi and the others were looking at them. "Hinata-chan I have a very bad feeling about this."

His godmother spoke for a bit about the meaning of the exams and on the friendship they fostered between the villages. But before she could begin to explain what the third phase of the exams would involve a sickly looking ninja stepped forward and asked to be allowed to take over the proceedings. In short order he was addressing them.

"My name is Hayate and I," cough. "Am the proctor for the third and final phase of the exams." He coughed for a bit before continuing. "Now I am afraid that before we do anything else we will have to have some preliminaries."

"What do you mean preliminaries?" Ino demanded.

"Well," cough. "Not to say the first two phases weren't difficult." Cough. "But I am afraid the fact is there are simply too many of you still standing. The finals will be held before a number of important guests and we must keep the event fast moving. Therefore before any of you will be permitted to advance to the finals we will have some preliminaries to cut your numbers down by half."

That got a loud reaction from them. "That's not fair!" Sakura shouted.

"If you are a ninja then you should already know that unfair situations are common." He coughed again. "Now before we begin does anyone wish to withdraw voluntarily? From here on out you are competing as individuals so you can make your choices without concern for your teammates. Would anyone like to withdraw?" Eighteen silent glares were his only answer. "Well," cough. "I'm not surprised. Well then the preliminaries will consist of a series of individual battles. The winners will move on to the finals. We don't want to have a blood bath here so if I see anyone in a hopeless situation I will stop the fight. But you shouldn't count on my intervention, to avoid death or serious injury you should yield the moment you feel yourself to be out matched." He coughed. There was a loud noise as a massive screen was brought out. "From this point on your fate will be in the hands of that screen. The names of two contestants will appear. Those two will then fight until there is a

winner. As there are eighteen of you we will have nine matches. Now then let's begin." All eyes looked up to the screen all the names flashed through until just two appeared.

## **SABAKU TEMARI VS UCHIHA SASUKE**

"Right off the bat huh?" Sasuke smiled.

"All right, everyone but the competitors please clear the arena floor." The competitors began heading for stairs that led to a walkway from which they could safely watch.

"Good luck Sasuke-kun!" Sakura encouraged.

"Thanks Sakura-chan." Once she had left he looked over the blonde sand kunoichi he was going to fight. He grinned. "I'll try not to hurt you."

Temari gave him a very thin smile. "Afraid I can't say the same."

Sasuke had no doubts at all that he would win. The girl didn't even have a real weapon out. She was actually trying to fight him with a fan! Hayate shouted for him to begin. Temari leapt back to get some room but Sasuke remained where he was.

Temari glared at him. "Didn't you hear the proctor? The match has begun!"

Sasuke shrugged. "I heard. I'm just trying to decide the easiest way to beat you without hurting you."

Kankuro chuckled. "Oh he did not just say that! Temari's going to hurt him."

Temari sent him a dangerous look. "Oh, you think I'm no match for you huh?"

Sasuke smirked. "I'm an elite Uchiha no kunoichi is a match for me."

Naruto turned to Hinata. "O.k. does he not remember you kicking his ass all those times at the academy?"

Hinata shrugged. "I think his pride is getting the better of him."

Temari opened her fan completely revealing three, 'moons.' "All right tough guy! I was going to stretch this thing out but since you just insulted my entire gender I'll make this quick and painful. She swung her fan. " **Great Cyclone Technique.**" A gigantic cyclone was instantly created and sped toward Sasuke. He leapt away but was too close and was pulled into it. Helpless he was viciously spun about. The winds cut into him and he cried out in pain. Temari smiled as the cyclone then threw him down onto the hard stone floor.

"One for me." She said happily. Looking up to the walkway she spotted Naruto and sent him a little wave.

Hinata glared. "Does every blonde girl you meet have to flirt with you?"

Naruto held up his hands. "I didn't do anything."

---

A team of medic nins were soon carrying Sasuke away on a stretcher. Sakura turned to leave.

"Sakura what are you doing?" Kurenai questioned sharply.

"I need to stay by his side! Sasuke-kun needs me!"

"Sakura, he is unconscious and won't even know you're there. In any case he is in good hands your place is here. You can go be with him once the preliminaries are complete." Kurenai stated.

"But..."

"Sakura! Your duty is to stay here." Kurenai said sharply. Sakura bit her lip but nodded.

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The overhead screen began to scroll through names again.

## **HYUGA HINATA VS SABAKU KANKURO**

Naruto leaned in and gave her a quick kiss. "For luck!" He smiled at her. "Kick his ass Hinata-chan!"

"Yeah go get him!" Kiba shouted.

"I will!" Hinata smiled confidently and headed down the stairs.

She and her opponent were soon opposing one another. "You know it's too bad. I would have liked to have faced your boyfriend." Kankuro said.

"No you wouldn't have." She said with certainty. "Byakugan." She only needed an instant and sent him a smile. "I know your secret."

Hayate signaled them to begin. Hinata immediately ran towards him. As they closed over the top of him. As she landed behind him she quickly tapped the large bandaged shape that was carried on his back half a dozen times. The results were instantaneous. Kankuro collapsed to the ground. There was a howl not of pain but of disbelief. The bandages began to come loose and, 'Kankuro' stood up. "What did you do?"

She smiled and dropped into a proper jyuken fighting stance. "I shut down the chakra point that I saw you were using to control your puppet. I'm a member of the Hyuga clan and my byakugan gives me the ability to see chakra and my gentle fist fighting style lets me close chakra points. Now do you want to give up or should I continue?"

Kankuro's reply was a yell and a leap towards her. He made the same basic assumption most people did on first meeting Hinata. They saw a small quiet girl and assumed she could not be much of a close in fighter. Hinata very quickly showed him how wrong he was.

In short order Kankuro was down on the floor next to his disguised puppet. As Hayate declared her the winner there was a loud clear cry.

"That's my girlfriend!!" Naruto shouted. Hinata covered her mouth and giggled as she headed for the stairs.

---

## **TENTEN VS AKIMICHI CHOUJI**

Chouji took on his human boulder form and promptly I tried to run Tenten down. This tactic was doomed to failure though. Tenten quite simply leapt onto the wall and stayed there. Chouji could not climb walls in his boulder form and so was left with no way to reach her. For Tenten the challenge was not winning but in doing it in a non lethal way. So she waited patiently for him to finally end his jutsu. The moment he did she threw down a perfect circle of kunai around him.

"Please surrender Chouji!" Tenten called down. "I don't want to hurt you but I will if you don't give up!"

"You might want to consider it." Hayate said.

Chouji eyed the kunai buried into the stone and nodded. "All right I give."

"Yatah!!" Lee and Guy shouted together. Neji shook his head in embarrassment.

---

## **NAMIKAZE NARUTO VS ABUMI ZAKU**

Hinata leaned over and kissed him. "For luck." She said. "You remember what Shino said about his abilities?"

Naruto nodded. "Yeah he's strictly a long range type."



"You know his abilities?" Kakashi asked. Naruto nodded. "What are they?"

Naruto smiled at him. "You know niisan I could tell you, but I don't think I will." Hinata giggled and Kiba laughed out loud as Naruto leapt off the walkway.

"Kick his ass Naruto!" Kiba shouted.

"Go get him Naruto-kun!"

The two of them faced off. "I'm going to hurt you kid." Zaku tried to sound mean.

Naruto smiled. "Oh please, you couldn't even deal with Shino."

"Begin!" Hayate called.

Naruto leapt back and worked his favorite jutsu. Zaku lined him up and fired off a blast from both arms but Naruto was moving too fast for him get a bead on. And then there were literally a hundred of him all around the arena floor. The original stood back and watched. Zaku took out a few clones before they could reach him, but once they did it was all over.

And as Naruto headed back up the stairs he laughed as he heard a loud cry. "That's my boyfriend!!"

---

## ROCK LEE VS ABURAME SHINO

For Shino, Lee was about the worst opponent he could have drawn. His attack was using his kikai bugs to drain an opponent of chakra and thus leave him without the ability to use jutsus. Unfortunately this tactic was worthless against an opponent unable to even mold chakra. Rock Lee took the fight straight to Shino. Shino's taijutsu was good but not anywhere near Lee's. Lee was able to win quickly and without revealing any of his secrets.

---

## INUZUKU KIBA VS DOSU

"Kiba!" Naruto shouted. "Let's make it a clean sweep! The whole team in the finals!"

"Hell yeah!!" Kiba yelled and Akamaru barked. "No way am I losing to this guy!"

"Kiba," Hinata spoke. "remember what Shino said about his abilities. If he even gets near you with that glove you will be in trouble."

He grinned excitedly. "Don't worry Hinata! I've got it covered!" He leapt down to the floor eager to go. As he did so he fed Akamaru a soldier pill and watched his fur become red. *No way am I missing the finals with Naruto and Hinata! We're going all out from the start Akamaru!*

When the match began he immediately ran through a jutsu Haku had taught everyone on team seven. " **Hiding Mist Technique.**" *Hah! So much better than smoke bombs!* With his opponent blinded he performed another jutsu in coordination with Akamaru. " **Man-Beast Doppelgangers Technique.**" Two beast like Kibas appeared in the thick fog.

Kiba called out. "Hey you, Sound ninja! Any chance you want to surrender?"

"Of course not!" An angry voice replied.

"Your funeral then." With his sense of smell it was child's play for Kiba and his dog to sneak up on Dosu and attack him at will then disappear into the fog. The two of them moved too fast and with too much surprise for Dosu to be able to do anything with his glove. When Dosu finally went down for good Kiba dispelled the mist and was named the winner.

Naruto turned to Kakashi. "See niisan we're all going to the final phase!"

Kakashi smiled and felt an unbelievable pride in this squad. "So you are. Dinner is on me tonight."

"Damn right it is!" Kiba yelled happily. "Team seven to the finals!"

---

"Don't keep me waiting." Gaara whispered. Hearing that his two siblings inched away from him. Having to stand there and watch all the fighting his blood lust was on the rise. They knew that when Gaara started talking to himself it was a bad sign. They looked up at the sign above.

## **HYUGA NEJI VS SABUKU GAARA**

"Finally." He teleported to the arena floor in a swirl of sand. Baki, Temari, and Kankuro all looked at each other nervously.

Neji grinned eager to go. Rock Lee and Might Guy were also eager. Guy early wanted to match his eternal rival by sending his full squad onto the next round. Tenten was the only one who had doubts. Now she was looking down at the face of Neji's opponent and the doubts were rising.

She turned to her teammate, the boy she had feelings for. "Neji maybe you should forfeit." All three males stared at her as if she were insane. "You could always take the exam again in six months."

Neji shook his head. "You don't actually expect me to forfeit because of what Naruto said do you?"

"But if what he said was true how can you get through his sand? It sounds like he has an ultimate defense!"

"Every defense can be defeated." Neji said with certainty. "Even if he was strong enough to kill some rain nins that does not mean I am

going to run and hide!"

"Tenten you cannot expect Neji to just give up can you?" Lee said in shock.

Guy shook his head in disappointment. Yosh! Tenten where is your fire of youth? Where is your faith in Neji's abilities? Do not speak of doubts but give him your full support!"

She knew it was useless to argue with him. So she did the next best thing. She quickly leaned forward and kissed his cheek. "For luck." She said quietly. She could feel herself blush. She had never done anything near that forward.

Neji looked at her and had a tiny little grin on his lips. "Thank you." The he leapt down.

Naruto frowned. "Good luck Neji." He said fervently. He didn't like the look in Gaara's eyes.

"Do your best big brother Neji." Hinata called out.

"Is that sand coming out of that gourd?" Kakashi asked.

"Yeah it is." Naruto said. He wondered what Neji would be able to do.

The two of them faced off. They both eyed one other in silence until they received the signal to begin.

"Byakugan," Neji spoke and moved in to strike his enemies chakra points. But as he tried to strike the sand rose up to block him. The first time he backed up and took another look at the sand. There was chakra in it. But there was nothing to indicate how he was controlling it.

"Are you just going to stand there?" Gaara called out without interest. He was standing with his arms crossed and in the exact spot he had started in. He had not moved an inch.

Neji gritted his teeth and rushed in again. He tried an entire series of strikes, but each one was blocked. Though he did not know it yet, it was hopeless for his attacks lacked the one element that might have allowed some degree of success; blinding speed. But he was the genius of the Hyuga clan and he was unwilling to simply give up. Not without using his most powerful technique. " **Eight Trigrams Sixty Four Palms.**" He launched himself against Gaara with all the speed and power he could muster.

And it did him no good at all. "My turn." Gaara said. The sand reached with a frightening swiftness and took hold of Neji by his legs. He was whipped around and slammed hard into the wall. Neji cried out in pain. The sand took hold of him again and again he was thrown against the wall. As this happened Gaara slowly smiled wider and wider.

"Neji give up!" Tenten screamed. She rounded on Lee and Guy. "What's wrong with you? He can't win! Tell him to give up!" Lee and Guy both looked at each other.

Guy looked at what was happening, it was not a battle it was simply a beating. "Neji!" Guy called out. "It is over admit defeat!" Seeing Guy do so Lee quickly joined in.

"What is he doing?!" Hinata screamed. For all his many insults and condescension over the years he was still her cousin and she still loved him. "Stop it!"

Naruto tightened his grip around the bars. "Kakashi-sensei can you stop this?"

"It's not my place to." He said.

Hayate called out. "Neji do you want to forfeit?"

Neji spat out blood and shook his head.

"I'm sorry Neji. Stop, the match is over! Gaara is the winner! Stop!"

"Oh thank Kami!" Tenten shouted in relief.

"Thank goodness." Hinata spoke. "Wait what he is doing?"

The sand began to cover Neji entirely from the neck down.

"Gaara don't do it!" Baki screamed. "The match is over stop!"

Kankuro and Temari were both looking on in horror, they knew.

Tsunade was leaning forward. "What is he doing? It's over!"

"Let him go! You've won the match." Hayate yelled.

Gaara licked his lips and began to make a fist.

Naruto had a sick feeling in his stomach. "I think he's..."

**" Exploding Sand Funeral."**

There was a deluge of blood on the arena floor.

# Results

**Author's Note:** This story has received a thousand reviews! Thank you!

Gabrella was humming a happy tune as she was leaving the Uchiha compound. Sasuke spotted her as he was returning from dinner. He smirked. "So cousin, what's with the dress and your hair being up?"

"You like it?" She primped a bit. "Sensei invited me to a celebration at the Namikaze estates!"

The answer immediately soured Sasuke's mood. "You're going to a party *there* ?" Seeing that only made Gabrella nod happily. "So what are they celebrating?"

Gabrella smiled. "The author received one thousand reviews!"

Sasuke chuckled. "Don't be a baka! There's no such thing as an author!"

Gabrella looked at him in panic. Jerk or not he was still her cousin. "Sasuke! Do *not* mock a higher power."

Seeing her panic brought a smile to his lips. "I repeat, there is no such thing as an author."

Gabrella stared at him. "Sasuke! If you mock him once more you will surely suffer a terrible curse for your insolence!"

"There is no such thing as an author!" He shouted out. Gabrella took a couple steps away from him and looked about worriedly. Sasuke crossed his arms and grinned at her. "See? I didn't get struck by lightning, I don't see a plague of frogs, and I'm not covered in boils. So much for that."

"Oh Sasuke-kun!" A happy voice called from behind him.

Sasuke turned around to see Sakura approaching him. "What are you doing here Sakura?"

She laughed and held up her left hand to him. "Silly! Where else would I be but with my husband?" On the ring finger of her left hand was a simple band of gold.

"Husband?!" He looked at his own left hand and sure enough he wore a matching ring.

"Told you." Gabrella sighed and left to go to the party.

---

He hadn't thought Gaara would actually do it. Not until the very last second. To blatantly commit murder with the Hokage and over a dozen Leaf ninjas watching? It was insane. He honestly hadn't thought Gaara would do it. So Naruto had watched with everyone else as Neji's body began to be crushed. There was a green flash that struck the sand and scattered it into the air as Neji screamed. Then all hell broke loose.

"NEJI!!" Tenten cried out and launched herself into the air. In a heartbeat she fired off a dozen kunai and other blades all aimed at Gaara's throat or head. His sand rose to block and a stream of it shot into the air to grab her. But before it could reach her, Asuma had thrown himself into it and scattered it.

"You bastard!" Naruto howled and felt rage flaring up. His katana was out and he leaped over the rail. But a hand grabbed him by the collar and hauled him back.

"Naruto stop!" Kakashi yelled and got both arms around him.

"Let go of me!" He heard Hinata screaming and it killed him inside.

"Naruto calm down or the red chakra will appear! In any case look!" Naruto looked down to the arena floor. Gaara was surrounded by a dozen ANBU that no one had known were even there. Guy had



caught Neji before he could hit the ground and had carefully laid him down as he screamed for the medics. Tsunade was immediately kneeling over Neji. Tenten was crying and screaming his name but Guy was now holding her to give the Hokage and the other medics room.

"He's alive but in critical condition get him to the emergency room now!" Tsunade shouted. The medic team had him on a stretcher and going in a heartbeat.

Meanwhile the sand had retreated and was simply surrounding Gaara who now suddenly seemed calm again. Kakashi leaned towards Naruto's ear and whispered. "Let the Hokage and the ANBU handle it. Hinata needs you right now."

Naruto looked at her she was staring at the scene below and crying. She needed him. "All right." Kakashi carefully let him go. Naruto nicked his hand and put his sword in its scabbard without bothering to clean it. He took a hold of Hinata and pulled her to him so that she was no longer looking down at the arena floor. "Hinata-chan..."

Hinata gladly accepted his comfort and buried her head into his shoulder. "Why?!" she cried out.

*Because that Gaara is a psychopath! No rational person would have done that here.* Those words would not have comforted her and so he merely held her and promised he would not let her go.

---

One look at the body had told her it was bad. And it was, the arms legs, ribs had all been crushed and there was severe internal damage as well. Much of his blood had been lost and he would need an immediate transfusion to even survive going into surgery. She looked at the blood on her hands. Horrible memories flashed back into her mind and she felt just a little queasy. She shook her head she couldn't let it bother her she would have to be the one to try and save his life. She would leave the proceedings to Hayate and go to the emergency room. But first she looked at the one who had done

this. Gaara was standing there with his arms crossed and looking unconcerned, almost *bored*. He was surrounded by a dozen very anxious ANBU as well as Hayate with his sword drawn and Asuma. Guy and his team were gone; they had all followed the medics. Tsunade ground her teeth, she hated pointless deaths! The deaths that had come during the second phase were awful enough. But this!

"Why did you try and kill Neji?" She demanded. "Hayate had declared you the winner! Why did you feel the need to almost *murder* him?"

Gaara looked at her without concern. "I did it because I felt like it." He answered matter of factly.

She could see every one of her ninjas stiffen at that. Hayate snarled and Asuma clenched his fists. All she had to do was give the word and they would attack the boy gladly.

"Hokage-san," the boy's sensei approached her very carefully. He immediately fell to one knee in a pose of abject surrender. His two students followed his example. "I beg forgiveness for my student's actions! He has always been one with a strong temper and bloodlust! I assure you that I and his father the Kazekage shall offer you our sincerest apologies and will gladly offer restitution for this act."

"I know who his father is!" she snapped "And don't insult me by suggesting you can buy us off! This was not an accident and this was not a mistake. This was a *deliberate* act!"

"If that's how you feel," Gaara spoke calmly. "Then just go ahead and attack me. I'll kill you all."

Hearing those words Naruto glared down at the red haired boy. But there was nothing he could do while Hinata clung to him.

Baki looked at his student. "Gaara in the name of the Kazekage be silent!" Gaara sent his sensei a hooded look, but did not speak further. Baki turned back to the Hokage sweating. "Hokage-san I

understand that your anger must be great, as is our sorrow for what has been done. But you cannot punish him for almost killing during the exams. Loss of life is a part of the exams and all the participants are made aware of the fact."

"Loss of life in the course of these exams is a tragedy. But this was something else entirely." She took a very deep shuddering breath. "Your student deserves to be executed on the spot, or the very least arrested for what he has done. But that would violate the agreements made by all the villages who participate in these exams. However for this callous act I disqualify him from these exams."

"Hokage-san you cannot do that! The Kazekage..."

"To hell with the Kazekage!" Tsunade screamed at him. "You can tell your Kazekage that his son is not a ninja he is a murdering animal!" Baki stared at her, such words were enough to incite wars. "You may also tell him that he is no longer welcome here! And that specifically includes the upcoming finals!"

"You are barring the Kazekage from entering Konoha?" Baki sounded stunned.

"That's right! And be very glad I hate war or I would be severely tempted to begin one. As it is we will not make war on you or end our treaty obligations. But neither will we permit him to enter this village as a friend." She looked at Temari. "As Temari has earned a place in the finals I will not deny her that, and you as her sensei may accompany her. But I want Gaara to leave immediately."

"That is a *severe* insult." Baki pointed out.

"So is trying to murder one of my people in front of me. And just so you know Gaara is banned from this village under penalty of death. Should he ever step foot in Konoha again he will be killed on sight. Now I'll give him one hour to leave the village I suggest you help him get packed." She began to walk swiftly away. "Now if you'll excuse me I am needed in surgery."

With no real choice Baki bowed his head and carefully led Gaara and the others out.

---

Though no one really wanted it, there were still two more preliminaries to be fought. Before that could happen the blood had to be cleaned up. Guy and his team had camped out in a waiting area near the emergency room. Hinata and Naruto soon joined them. Once the arena was ready again the final two matches took place. Ino managed to defeat Kin. While Shikamaru was able to use his shadow jutsu to capture and defeat a distracted Sakura. Hayate decided to go ahead and draw the names for the final matches out of a hat. They would be; Naruto vs Lee, Shikamaru vs Temari, Kiba vs Tenten, and Hinata vs Ino. But for the time being most people had other things on their minds.

---

A few miles outside of Konoha Baki signaled for a halt. Temari had been left in the village to continue to train. Baki had felt it to be his duty to escort Gaara and Kankuro back and make a personal report to the Kazekage.

Baki looked at Gaara and reminded himself to keep his anger in check. He was one of the very few people that Gaara had never threatened to kill. That didn't mean he could say anything he wanted. "Gaara do you have any idea what you have done? You have put years of careful preparation into complete chaos! The plan has been ruined! Now the Kazekage must decide whether to come up with a new battle plan or else abandon this war all together. And that is to say nothing of the fact that the Leaf nins will be more alert now!"

Gaara looked at him calmly. "So what? I have never cared what the Kazekage wanted. Whether we go to war or not it's all the same to me. Now lets go." He leapt away.

Baki swallowed a curse. But what could he do? Not even the Kazekage could really make Gaara do anything he didn't want to. "What a mess." He muttered to himself.

---

Sasuke lay in his hospital bed staring up at the ceiling. There were already a number of flowers. His mom, uncle, cousin Gabrella, and a bunch of others had come to see him. They had all assured him (except for Gabrella) that losing in the preliminaries prior to the final round was still excellent for a rookie. Riyuki seemed to have no doubt at all that he would make Chunin next time. His uncle was proud of him. Sasuke shut his eyes. He was certain his uncle's opinion would change if he knew the real truth. He entered the exams confident that he would show everyone his power. Instead he's had his weakness rubbed into his face. Lee had beaten him before the exams even started. Dosu had caught him by surprise and he'd been in trouble until Lee came to his rescue. And then that girl from sand had crushed him with one move. All these defeats could only lead to one conclusion, he was weak. *How can I save this village? How can I avenge my father when I am so weak?*

The door to his room opened and a visitor with some flowers entered. "Hello Sasuke, I heard you were here and I wanted to come by and give you my best wishes."

Sasuke frowned. "Thanks for the flowers. But I don't really feel like company." Sakura had been there for over two hours until a nurse finally convinced her he was all right and really would be released tomorrow.

Kabuto smiled and found a spot for the flowers. "Really? I was rather hoping we could finish the chat we were having before."

Sasuke shook his head. "You couldn't even pass the second phase of the exams. What could you possibly know about acquiring the sort of power I need?"

"Oh come now Sasuke! Surely you know that appearances can be deceptive."

He thought about Temari and felt a spark of anger. "I also know something about talk being cheap. If you really did have a way to get

a whole lot of power you wouldn't be as weak as you are."

"So you need a demonstration?" Kabuto asked.

"Yeah, if you want me to believe what you're saying show me something."

Kabuto gave him a considering look. "All right." He removed his glasses. "I don't normally do this but I'll show you my *real* face."

"Huh?"

And there standing before him Kabuto let his old blood rise up and showed him what he really was. Sasuke gasped and tried to crawl back from him. "What are you?"

Kabuto ended the transformation just as quickly as he had begun it. He carefully put his glasses back on. "Scary, huh?" He asked pleasantly.

Sasuke stared at him. "What are you?" He repeated.

"I'm much more than I appear. If I wanted to I could have easily completed the second phase and be in the finals. Had I wished it I could be a Jonin right now."

"Then why aren't you?"

Kabuto smiled. "My master prefers that I remain hidden."

"Your master?" Sasuke asked curious.

Kabuto nodded happily. "Yes, he is a one of a kind genius. A ninja of incredible intellect and power. *He* could give you what you seek." Kabuto's grin seemed hard. "For a price of course."

"You have a master?" Sasuke said. "Does the Hokage know about this master you serve?"

Kabuto laughed. "No, and if you were to go to her with what I've told and shown you, you could get me into serious trouble. But then you would never acquire the power you crave so badly. Don't try to blackmail me Sasuke. It's rude and completely unnecessary. I want to help you." He gave him a wave of the hand and turned to go. "Well I'm glad we got to talk some more."

"Wait! You're leaving?"

Kabuto nodded. "That's right."

"But what about me acquiring more power? And I want to know who this master of yours is."

"Oh, we'll talk again. But right now the timing isn't right. Be patient for a bit. All good things to those who wait." With that Kabuto left.

Sasuke leaned back into the pillows. What Kabuto had shown him had indeed been scary. It had also been very interesting. The idea of a master ninja who could impart great power to others sounded like something from a story. He knew that there was bound to be a high price for it. But he was ready to pay any price for the power he needed.

---

After six hours the doors to the emergency room opened and a tired Tsunade stepped out. Guy, Tenten, Lee, Hinata, and Naruto all jumped to their feet.

"Hokage-sama," Tenten burst out. "How is he?"

She did not smile but she did nod her head. "He's going to live." She sighed. "But he will never be a ninja again."

"What?!" Guy cried out. "But Lady Tsunade you are the world's top medical expert! Surely there must be a way..."

"Guy!" Tsunade cut him off sharply. "If you think I am the world's top medical expert then don't you think I know what I'm talking about? Do you think I would say such things lightly?" She stopped and took a breath. "I am sorry I snapped at you, the surgery was extremely difficult. The important thing is that he will live. But he will never regain the mobility or stamina needed to be a ninja."

"Hokage-sama I am sorry but I do not believe you. I believe that if Neji works hard he can one day fully recover and again be a great ninja!" Lee spoke up.

Tsunade looked at him sadly. "Lee that is a wonderful attitude to have but I am afraid that there are limits to what the body can do, no matter how strong your will is."

"Can we see him?" Tenten asked.

"No I am afraid not. He will be unconscious for sometime. I am having him transferred to Konoha hospital. You will be able to visit him there once he is out of intensive care."

---

It was well past midnight by the time they were able to get back home. Naruto escorted Hinata home before returning to his. He was not surprised to find his mom there waiting for him despite the hour.

"You heard about Neji?" Naruto asked

Kushina nodded. "Hiashi received a message and he told me. It's a terrible thing."

Naruto nodded very tired. "It is. Hinata's a wreck."

"Just be glad that he at least survived."

Naruto nodded and headed off to bed. It had started as such a good day too. He went to sleep wondering if he would meet Gaara again one day. He very much hoped that he would.



## The one who endures

"This mission report reads like a damn fairy tale!" Tsunade growled. "Why are you bothering to protect her? It's obvious who's to blame for this!" Tsunade shouted.

"I agree." Kushina said simply. "As I was the mission leader I alone am responsible for the failure of this mission. I accept whatever punishment you deem correct." For Kushina facing down the anger of her old friend was a unique experience. But she bore it well enough. To look at her face no one would ever guess that her supreme leader was upset with her.

Tsunade could feel the vein in her forehead about ready to explode. "No Kushina the fault lies with me for giving that girl *another* chance. Whatever her potential Gabrella is a washout. She simply lacks the strength of will to be kunoichi. I should never have forced her on you. It's a shame but there it is. You can consider the experiment over. You can keep training Haku as your apprentice until a position on a team opens somewhere."

"Are you breaking your word then?" Kushina asked.

Tsunade gave her a sharp look. For ninja questioning ones honor was a serious insult. "Don't give me that crap Kushina! I made a mistake and now I'm going to fix it. Why are you trying to protect her?"

"Because I am her sensei. I owe her my protection and guidance. I accepted this assignment with the understanding that it would last for six months. It has only been three weeks."

"Do you honestly want her for a full six months Kushina? You are her *third* sensei since she left the academy. The other two couldn't reach her what makes you think you can?"

She thought about that. She took a glance at the clock on the wall, it was a little before eleven thirty in the morning. "You said she did not have the strength of will to be a kunoichi. Let me test that. Give me until twelve noon tomorrow to tell you whether or not I want to keep her for the full six months."

Tsunade frowned. "Why are you so stubborn about this? It's not your fault that she is a poor ninja."

Kushina answered in a quiet voice. "Minato used to say that there were no poor ninjas, only poor captains. I owe it to her to at least try my very best to help."

"Fine then, do your test and come see me again tomorrow."

---

Outside the Hokage's office the two other members of team Kushina waited. Gabrella sat in the uncomfortable wooden chair staring glumly at the doors to the Hokage's office. At one and the same time she wanted those doors to open so she could end this horrible suspense but she was also dreading the moment. *The condemned awaits the judgment. This could really be it. How could I have been so stupid?!*

"Are you all right Gabrella?" Haku asked from the seat next to hers.

"No, I'm really not." She let out a sigh. "You know this is probably going to be good bye kid."

"What do you mean?" He suddenly looked alert.

"I mean I screwed up really, really bad this time and I doubt I'll still be on a team with you. Hell I'll be lucky if I'm still a ninja by the end of the day." She said morosely.

"It was a failed mission." Hake agreed. "But was it truly so terrible? No one died."

The doors opened. "Not yet." Gabrella muttered under her breath.

Kushina strode out of the office and the two of them came to their feet. Kushina's face was absolutely blank. Gabrella could get no read on her at all. She found that a hell of a lot scarier than just seeing the woman angry like she had been before.

"Haku you are dismissed for the day. Gabrella come with me." Kushina spoke in a normal voice.

"Kushina-sama, what are you going to do with Gabrella?"

"She's going to punish me for being such a screw up." Gabrella said quietly.

"I am going to introduce her to an old custom from Whirlpool country." Kushina answered ignoring Gabrella's comment.

"Huh?" Gabrella said.

"May I come with you?" Haku asked.

Kushina shook her head. "I don't think Gabrella would want you to see this."

"But I want to support her in her hour of need!" He turned to his teammate. "Do you want me to come along?"

Gabrella just looked down at him for a moment. Then she chuckled. "Sure why not? Everyone else gets to see what a mess I am. Why shouldn't you get to enjoy the show too?"

Kushina frowned a bit and honestly wondered if Tsunade wasn't right.

---

She led them out of the tower and towards the training grounds. They walked in silence. Gabrella wondered what her punishment

would be. That this was a punishment she had no doubt. She deserved to be punished. *Why do I always screw up?!*

Kushina led them out to training ground thirty nine. It was one of the least used training grounds and the furthest from the village but within the walls. She took them to a clearing. It was summer and the sun was beating down hot. Kushina nodded to herself once. Then she turned to Gabrella.

"Do you know why we were summoned to the Hokage's office?" She said pleasantly

Gabrella looked to the ground. "We failed our mission." She answered quietly.

"Look at me when you address me." Kushina said in that same upbeat tone. She waited as Gabrella's eyes slowly came up. "What was our mission?"

Gabrella sighed. "Lord Kazumori had brought his prize stallion with him to the village to be entered in some of the races. We were to provide security and make sure the horse was kept safe."

"That's right a relatively simple and straightforward C-rank. What were my instructions to you?"

She swallowed. "I was to stay in the barn and watch the horse for eight hours or until I was relieved. If anything suspicious occurred I was to contact you immediately by radio."

"Were my instructions clear?"

"Yes." Gabrella answered in a small voice.

"At the time you received them did you feel they were beyond your ability to carry out?"

"No." Her eyes lowered again. She instantly felt Kushina's hand on her chin and her face pushed up again. Kushina leaned in until she

was almost nose to nose. Her green eyes were angry.

"Eyes... on... me!" Kushina spat out. Her tone was no longer friendly though it was not as hot as it had been this morning. "Did you carry out my orders?"

"No," the girl said miserably.

"And why not?"

"I," she dry swallowed. "I was bored and I wanted to watch some of the races." *What a weak pathetic excuse!*

"You were bored and wanted to watch some of the races." It sounded even more pathetic when Kushina said it. "You disobeyed a direct order because you were bored." She finally let go of Gabrella's chin and pulled her head back. "In a ninja's world those who violate the rules and fail to follow orders are lower than garbage." Gabrella flinched at the harsh words. Kushina glanced at Haku. "While it *is* true that you are not mindless drones and there are times when orders should be broken it must be for a much better reason than boredom. You *deserted* your post for no better reason than that?" Kushina gave her no chance to answer. "How long were you away watching the races?"

"About fifteen minutes."

"And what did you find when you finally sauntered back to your post?" Gabrella hesitated. "I asked you a question Genin."

"The horse was dead." Gabrella said in a small voice.

Kushina put a hand to her ear. "I am sorry, what was that again?"

She took a deep breath. "The horse was dead." She repeated at a normal volume.

"The horse was dead." Kushina said flatly. "Though he was just a bit more than a regular plow horse. That horse was Lord Kazumori's

pride and joy a one of a kind thoroughbred racing champion. Lord Kazumori is a wealthy and important man with many business interests. Every year he spends *millions* on ninjas for all sorts of missions. He has informed the Hokage that he will *never* hire another Leaf nin. Because you willfully disobeyed my orders and abandoned your post this village has suffered a huge financial loss." Kushina let the words hang in the air and simply glared at the kunoichi for a bit. The silence was allowed to stretch out until Gabrella couldn't stand it.

"Am I being stripped of shinobi status?" Gabrella asked. For her that was a fate quite literally worse than death.

"That was the Hokage's intention. I managed to dissuade her, for right now at least."

Gabrella was surprised. "You stood up for me with the Hokage?"

"I am your sensei Gabrella. Even when I am upset with you, you remain my student and I owe you all the help I can give you."

"Thank you sensei." Gabrella said humbly. She had expected Kushina to be screaming for her head.

Kushina looked her over. "Why do you want to be a ninja?" Kushina no longer sounded angry, though there was a bit of exasperation to her tone. "Whenever someone suggests you give up being shinobi you dig in your heels. Yet you refuse to give anything near your best effort. Are you a ninja just solely to spite your family?"

"No! I want to be ninja to earn my family's *respect!* I want my father and everyone else in the clan to look at me and be proud of me!" Gabrella spoke with real passion.

"Then why do you give such a poor effort?" Kushina sounded truly frustrated. "When you tell me why you want to be a ninja I believe you! Yet if it is your dream to earn your family's respect you must work hard to make that dream come true. My son dreams of being

Hokage, a ninja named Rock Lee dreams of proving to people that you can be a splendid ninja even without jutsus. Both of them strive every single day and work hard to make their dreams come true. Why don't you? Can you explain it to me Gabrella? Can you make me understand?"

She sighed. "I'm sorry; I don't know why I'm such a screw up." Kushina took her sword out and she flinched. "Uhm sensei what is that for?"

"Do you have any water or food on you?" Kushina asked.

"What?"

"Do you have any water or food in your possession right now?"

"Uhm, I have my canteen with me. No food though."

"Toss me your canteen please." Not sure what was going on Gabrella unhooked it from her belt and tossed it to her. Kushina took her katana and put the tip in the soft soil. She began to walk around Gabrella as she watched.

"Do you know what a ninja is Gabrella?"

"Uhm," she watched as her sensei walked around her dragging her sword through the dirt. "Someone able to perform jutsus?"

"No." Kushina continued to walk around her.

"Someone who is well trained in killing?"

"No, killing is merely something we do but not who we are." Kushina had finished drawing a circle with a five foot radius around Gabrella. She wiped the dirt from her blade and returned it to its scabbard. "A ninja is one who endures. *That* is what defines us. A true ninja is one who stands firm and endures no matter what! Even in the face of death or the loss of everything a ninja will endure and go on. For she

must have the spirit and guts to never give up! Do you have that inside of you Gabrella?"

"I, uhm..."

"Because if you do not there is no point in you continuing this." She performed three hand signs then drove two fingers into the circle she had just made. There was a soft golden flash and the light seemed to run along the small gouge in the earth. "Seal."

"What did you just do sensei?" Gabrella asked nervously.

"I am going to test your endurance. This is an old tradition from my homeland. It was actually part of my academy graduation test. Whirlpool was a small and poor land we did not have resources to waste. Every ninja had to prove they were truly committed before they were granted a hitai-ite. I am giving you a test to see if you are *really* committed to being a ninja."

She had a bad feeling about this. "What sort of test?"

"It's simple; you must remain in that circle for the next twenty four hours. No food, no water, and no leaving the circle. If you leave that circle before," she checked her watch. "Eleven forty four tomorrow morning you are done as a ninja."

"But Kushina-sama!" Surprisingly it was Haku who protested. "It's the middle of summer and you're not going to give her any water?"

Kushina shook her head. "No, the thirst and hunger are a part of the test." She set down Gabrella's canteen directly in front of her about fifteen feet away. "She may grow extremely thirsty and hungry but she will not die in just one day." She looked at Gabrella. "I will stand up for you and fight for you, but you have to show me you truly want this."

Gabrella slowly nodded. "I understand sensei."



"But Kushina-sama..."

"Haku," Gabrella said quietly. "Please don't argue with her on my behalf. I'll accept my punishment without complaint."

Kushina shook her head. "This isn't punishment; this is a test of your commitment."

"Of course sensei."

---

She checked her watch. It had been twenty minutes since Kushina and Haku had left her alone. Only twenty minutes? It felt a whole lot longer. She ran her coat sleeve over her forehead, she was already sweating. She was already getting thirsty. She looked over to her canteen. Of course Kushina had left it behind, so near and yet so far. She went ahead and pulled off her dark blue jacket and sat down in the dirt. What an unbelievably miserable day.

---

She stood there feeling sick as Kushina did a diagnostic jutsu on the animal. The mocha colored stallion was lying on its side in its stall unmoving. The horse's eyes had rolled up into this head and there was a tiny trickle of blood from the mouth. Kushina rose to her feet and came over to her, thunderbolts in her eyes.

"The stallion is dead! Gabrella what happened?" Kushina demanded, angrier then Gabrella had ever seen before.

"Nothing happened I swear! I found him like that!"

Kushina leaned forward and put her face into Gabrella's. "What do you mean, 'found him like that?' Was he acting sick? Did he just fall over? Did anyone else enter the barn?"

She began feeling very nervous and kept trying to calm down without much success. "Nothing happened."

Kushina's eyes flattened and if it was possible she seemed to get even angrier. "You are lying to me! Gabrella tell me *everything* right now and if I think you're fudging or leaving anything out I'm sending you to Ibiki for interrogation."

She didn't doubt the threat for a second. She swallowed. "I, uhm, wasn't here when it happened."

"What do you mean you weren't here? Where were you?"

"Uhm well... I sort of got bored and really didn't think anything would happen so I went over to the track for a little bit just to see a race. But I swear I wasn't gone more than fifteen minutes!"

Kushina pulled her face back and stared at her in disbelief. "You disobeyed my orders and abandoned your post because you were bored?" Kushina shook her head. "Do you have any idea the sort of trouble you are in?"

"I just..."

"Shut up!" Kushina screamed and Gabrella wisely clamped down her mouth. "If you say anything more I just might have to do something I'm going to regret! Get out of here! Go to the tower lobby and wait for me there. I have to go explain to Lord Kazumori that his prize stallion was poisoned under our watch!"

---

*I don't blame her for punishing me like this. I deserve it. This isn't like the push ups. I was stupid and that poor animal died because of it. Why? Why do I always do such stupid things?!* She looked up at the sun. It was just hanging there in the sky beating down mercilessly on her. She looked at her watch. It was twenty four minutes since they had left her. "This is going to be a loooong day." She muttered.

---

Three hours. The sun was still high up in the western sky and she was really thirsty now. She was also very, very bored. She shut her

eyes and decided to play a game with herself. She had decided that today was the worst day of her life. She would go through and pick some of the other worst days.

---

She stood in her father's study waiting for him. She always hated the waiting. It was a way for him to remind her that she really wasn't that important to him. He would deal with her in his own time whenever that might be.

The door opened and her father entered. He gave her one of his, 'cold' looks she knew so well. He wasn't a screamer or a shouter. When he was upset he withdrew. He stood behind his desk and looked at her.

"Your sensei has asked you to be removed from your squad. This is the second time Gabrella."

"I know father." She answered quietly.

"You are a disgrace to the entire clan and to me." His words were crisp and without feeling. She wasn't even worth getting angry about. "I intend to inform the Hokage that I and the clan wash our hands of you. Whether or not you are ever placed on another team will be entirely up to her." And just like that he began going over the papers on his desk. She was dismissed.

"I did my best." She said quietly.

"You always say that." He did not bother to look up from his papers. "Leave me now I have *important* things to deal with."

She left his study and got to her room. *I am not going to cry. I am not going to cry. I don't care what he thinks. I don't care what he thinks.* She repeated the lies to herself again and again as she slowly cried herself to sleep.

---

She had just returned home from the Chunin exams in the Grass village. She would be fourteen in a few months. She was standing in his study and waiting for her father to come. He entered and quietly sat down. He stared at her with cold disappointment. "So you and your team failed to get past the second phase of the exams for a third time. What is even worse you attacked one of your teammates and your sensei is seriously considering removing you from the squad."

She looked at him in shock. "Wykol-sensei wouldn't do that!"

"Actually he would. He is tired of dealing with your insubordination and attacking your teammate is the final straw."

"It's his fault we failed! We had an ambush set up and he gave our position away!"

"So?" Her father said without any sympathy at all. "Weaker teammates are a fact of life. They rely on an Uchiha's strength to pull them through. Had you been stronger his mistake would not have mattered." Her father shook his head. "I will see to it that you are placed on a new team." He looked at her with resignation. As if she was a piece of equipment that needed to be replaced. "I have decided that I will no longer train with you."

"What?!" She gaped at him open mouthed. "Dad are you giving up on me?"

"Gabrella my time is too valuable to simply waste."

"Helping me is a waste?" She couldn't keep the hurt out of her voice.

"Trying to help you achieve what will never be is a waste." He said simply. "You will be fourteen soon. It is time to accept that you will likely never achieve the sharingan."

"People have been older and gotten it! Gutano was seventeen when he gained his."

"That is true," her father admitted. "However while it remains possible you will still achieve sharingan it becomes more and more unlikely with every passing day. "In any case I have given you extra training for a year now and it has achieved nothing."

"But father I always try my best! On my missions and in training with you and with sensei I give my best."

"You give your best and what do you have to show for it?" He asked indifferently.

She clenched her fists in bitter frustration. "I work and train until I drop. Doesn't it make a difference how hard I work?"

"No, results are all that matter. You may go now. You will not be meeting with your old team again. I will inform you when you have been placed on a new squad."

She left the study feeling bitter and angry that both her sensei and her father had given up on her. Damn it! She was the first to admit she wasn't a genius like her cousin Itachi. But she tried! She worked her ass off! And now her father had told her it didn't matter.

"Why should I even bother then if it doesn't matter? I'm a failure no matter what." She muttered to herself.

---

"Gabrella?"

She opened her eyes. She had been trying to sleep. She was relieved to see the sun a little further down in the sky. She was surprised to see Haku standing before her holding a small carton. "Kid what are you doing here?" She was still not sure what she thought of Haku. She didn't dislike him; he was mush too nice for that. But he was too much Kushina's lap dog for her to think very much of him. He was always going on with that, 'sama' nonsense and always eager to make her happy.

Haku held out the carton in his hand. "I brought you some ice cream. It's a pint of chocolate. That is your favorite isn't it?"

From her seat she gawked at him. "What are you *trying* to get me kicked off?"

"No!" He said in shock. "I knew you would be miserable and I wanted to try and make you feel better."

She looked at him and looked at the ice cream in his hands. Her throat was parched. "You were here when she started this. She said no food, no water, and no leaving the circle."

"I recognize the seal she used." Haku explained. "It is only tripped if a living being crosses over it. I can toss you the ice cream, you can eat it, and then toss me the empty carton and I will dispose of it."

She stared at him and laughed. "Kid I never knew you had such a devious mind. I like it!"

Haku shrugged. "Strategy is strategy whether the mission goal is assassination or delivering ice cream."

She eyed him carefully. "I'm not taking the ice cream but thanks. I'll do sensei's punishment, besides I think she would know somehow."

---

Kushina watched the scene in a tree about seventy yards away. She was surprised that Haku had shown up and even more surprised to see what he had brought with him. She was glad that Gabrella had refused his offer. If she'd accepted Kushina would have failed her on the spot.

---

"Kid why are you even here?" Despite her dry lips she smiled. "I mean normally you *love* following the rules and making, 'Kushina-sama' happy. Where does this sudden outlaw streak come from?"

He gave her a very serious look. "You are my teammate and I care about you. I know what it's like to be miserable and hungry and thirsty and I wanted to help."

The words were very kind and very unexpected. "Thank you." She continued slowly. "But you shouldn't worry about me I'm a screw up and a failure. I always let everyone down. I'm not someone you should worry about."

Haku eyed her sadly. "I think everyone deserves to have someone care about them. I know what it's like to be all alone and have no one at all. To live knowing that no one would care or even notice if you died. To be all alone and unwanted is a horrible thing."

He spoke so sadly that she couldn't help but feel for him. "Geez Haku what kind of life have you had?"

He shook his head. "That does not matter. Gabrella you say that I shouldn't worry about you because you think you are a failure. Do you see yourself as a person or as a tool?"

"What?"

"Do you see yourself as a tool or as a person?" He asked seriously.

"As a person obviously." She shook her head. "Why would I think of myself as a tool?"

Haku shrugged. "Until I met Naruto that is how I saw myself. My father taught me that all ninja are but tools to be used by others."

"Your *father* taught you that? Geez Haku, he must have been a real monster."

The boy's features immediately darkened. "Do not speak of Zabuzasama that way! He rescued me from loneliness he gave me a purpose and a reason to live! He was my precious person and I loved him!"

She held out her hands defensively. "Wait I'm sorry, I apologize, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to judge. Given what a wreck my life is I'm in no position to judge."

Haku nodded and relaxed again. "It is all right."

"Wait a second! Your father's name was Zabuza? The Zabuza who was a missing nin from the mist village?"

Haku nodded. "That is right. My name is Momochi Haku; my adoptive father was Momochi Zabuza. I lived and fought at his side while he was a missing nin until he died in battle against Naruto and his squad."

She stared at the polite little boy. The thought he had been living with a Bing book missing nin completely blew her mind. She had just sort of taken it for granted that he had been raised in Konoha like other Leaf nins. "Haku what kind of life have you had?"

"My life is a sad tale and I do not think you would enjoy hearing about it."

"Actually I really think that I would... if you don't mind telling me."

Haku did not really care for reliving his painful memories. He had told his life's story only twice. Once to Naruto and once to Kushina. But if Gabrella wanted to hear it and if it would help her in some way, then he did not mind telling it again. "Very well. I was born in a snowy little village in the land of Water. I was happy..."

She listened to the story riveted. He was such a polite and likable kid and seemed so well adjusted; who would have ever thought he'd have been through so much? His father had killed his mother and then tried to kill him. He'd been forced to survive on the streets until taken in by a man who only wanted to use him. Forced to live a life on the run as the partner of a feared missing nin. And why? Because he was special; because he possessed a kekkei genkai. Had he



been born a perfectly normal boy he would still be living in that peaceful village with his parents.

"So I came here and was taken in by Naruto and Kushina-sama. They have become my precious people and I would die to protect either of them. I have also begun to make friends. I consider Kiba, Hinata, and Kakashi to be friends of mine." He paused a bit. "I would like to consider you to be my friend as well."

She smiled. "I would like that." Then she chuckled a bit. "That is if you want a screw up like me as a friend."

"Gabrella why do you keep referring to yourself that way?"

"Because it's true, I'm a failure." She hesitated for a bit. She hadn't really known him that long and this wasn't something she relished talking about. But he had trusted her, and maybe it would help to talk to someone who might understand. "Let me tell you about myself."

---

Kushina's ears pricked up. This might prove promising.

---

"I can understand when you say you've suffered because of what's in your blood. I have too, though not to the same extent or for the same reasons. As you may have noticed unlike the village hidden in mist, here people love kekkei genkai. In fact once you're ready to have a family you can probably petition the Hokage to establish a new clan in this village."

He looked at her in shock. "Me establish a clan?"

Gabrella simply nodded. "Of course! Haku kekkei genkai are worshipped here in Konoha. If you don't believe me ask Hinata. She is heir to the Hyuga clan; they are respected and feared for the power of theirs." She sighed. "As are the Uchiha."

"But if your special abilities are respected then what is the difficulty?"

"The difficulty Haku is that in my clan it is not enough to be an average or even a good ninja. To be acknowledged among the Uchiha you must be a great ninja." She chuckled dryly. "And pretty much by definition that means you must have a sharingan. There are plenty of members of my clan who cannot activate theirs and live as ordinary citizens within the Uchiha compound. We have bakers, cobblers, carpenters, and such and they are accepted as family. But *they* are not permitted to wear the family crest outside the compound." She picked up her jacket and showed him the fan symbol on the back. "Only ninjas are permitted to wear this out in public. My clan's pride is in the belief that those who wear this symbol are the warrior elite of the Leaf village. Every Uchiha ninja is expected to be a team leader and a great hero. Every Uchiha ninja must be great. To be great is expected. To be good is disappointing. To be average is frowned upon. To be bad is not permitted." She let out a long breath. "I am average Haku. Once I thought I was good, but I was never great. When I was younger I would try very, very hard to be the great ninja my father and my clan wanted me to be. I would do my best, and it wouldn't be good enough. I pushed too hard because I was desperate to be great. That caused problems with my first team. I was always demanding everyone work as hard as I did. I was always pushing to try and get our team to do more. I thought I was being a leader the way an Uchiha was supposed to be. But it turns out I was just being a bad teammate. I never listened to the others and couldn't handle any criticism. So I was a screw up and a failure because I tried too hard. But I held onto the hope that once I had my sharingan everything would change. Every family member with it said the same thing; once they had their sharingan they found greatness. Well, except for one of my cousins they all said that. So I lived in the hope that I would get my sharingan and finally become the great ninja I wanted to be. But I'm fifteen now and I've begun to lose hope that it will ever happen." She buried her face in her hands. "I worked so *hard* ! But no matter how hard I tried I could never make things work. My original team and sensei turned their backs on me and so did my father. No matter how hard I tried, no matter that I did my best it was never enough! No matter how hard I struggled I could never make things work. People turned their

backs on me and so at some point, I'm not sure when, I stopped trying so hard. I kind of came to the conclusion that if I was doomed to fail no matter what there was no reason to work so hard at it. And *that's* why I left my post Haku! That's why we failed the mission. That's why an innocent animal had to suffer. That's why I'm sitting in this circle right now dying of thirst. I figured I would end up screwing up in some way so I might as well have some fun." She stopped and looked away. "You must think I'm pretty pathetic huh? But do you understand now why I'm such a screw up? Whether I try hard or don't try at all I always screw things up." She stopped talking and was surprised to find she felt better about things now.

"When I was defeated by Naruto I was ashamed at my weakness." Haku spoke quietly. "When he invited me to join him here I told him I was a weak tool and that he would not get any use from me. He told me he did not want a tool but rather a friend. It seems to me you have the same problem I did. The only difference is that my goal was to be an effective tool. You wished to be a great ninja and despise yourself that you can not attain this goal. Knowing Naruto and Kushina-sama and the others has taught me a great many things. One of the most important is that you do not have to be the strongest to still be valuable and important to others. I am no match for Naruto or Kushina-sama or Kakashi. But that knowledge does not bother me. I am the best ninja I can be and that is enough."

Gabrella sighed. "What if it's not enough?"

"I can not speak for your clan, but I know that for Kushina-sama that would be enough."

Gabrella sighed again and looked at the sky. She suddenly laughed. The sun was gone from a darkening sky. She checked her watch. "Haku you kept me talking for three hours!"

"Oh! I apologize I did not mean to take up so much of your time!"

She shook her head laughing. "You silly boy. *Thank you!* You made the time fly by and I appreciate it. I just wish you could stay here until

the end of my punishment."

"If you wish me to stay then I will stay."

She shook her head. "No you've done plenty already."

"Would my staying help you?" Haku asked.

"Well... yeah it would."

He nodded and got up "Very well then. I will leave to get permission from Kushina-sama and acquire my sleeping bag. Would it be against the rules for me to bring you some blankets?"

"Probably, but I have my jacket and it doesn't really get cold at night during the summer. Haku why are you going so far out of your way for me?"

He smiled at her. "Kushina-sama spoke part of a quote to you earlier. 'In a ninja's world those who violate the rules and fail to follow orders are lower than garbage.' However there is another part. 'Those who do not care for and support their fellows are lower than that.' We are comrades and friends now. I will do whatever I can to support you. I will be back soon I promise." With that he left.

---

Kushina had to race home in order to beat Haku back. She'd heard everything the two of them had said and now had a much better understanding of Gabrella. Technically Haku should not have been there. Part of the test involved dealing with the hardship alone. But Kushina suspected that Gabrella already had plenty of experience with that. So she decided it would be a greater help to let the girl bond a bit with her teammate.

"Kushina sama?"

"Yes Haku?"

He bowed to her and got a really serious look on his face. "I have been talking to Gabrella for the last few hours. I would like permission to go and stay with her until her punishment is complete."

"I see." Kushina shrugged. "So long as you do not give her and food or drink and do not cross the circle then I have no objection."

---

Gabrella was actually surprised and pleased when Haku returned. She was used to people breaking their promises to her. Along with his sleeping bag he also brought along a small shogi set. She had never learned how to play and so he taught her. As he crushed her in a couple games (he didn't seem to have the concept of *letting* someone win) they talked some more. For someone a couple years younger than she was Haku had a *lot* of life experience. As it got near midnight they both decided to get some sleep. She put her jacket back on and lay down in the dirt. Her lips were cracked her throat parched and she was very hungry. She looked over to where Haku was already in his sleeping bag with his eyes closed. *But at least I'm not alone.*

---

She dreamed.

It was her sixth birthday party. And she was so very happy. There were all sorts of family members and other children in the house. There were presents, and cake and ice cream. There were games and laughter. Her favorite cousin Sasuke was there, he was always smiling and happy. Her older cousin Itachi was there too. He had graduated the academy and was a real live ninja. Uncle Fugaku and aunt Mikoto were both there. She was having a wonderful time.

Her cousin Itachi gave her one of his too rare smiles. "Happy birthday Gabrella."

"Thank you Itachi!" She said happily. "Are you really ninja like daddy?"

"Yes, I am what they call a genius and needed less time than most."

"You don't seem happy." She pointed out.

He reached down and rubbed her head. "Happiness has nothing to do with being a ninja." Itachi walked off and she felt a little sad.

"Is something wrong honey?" Her daddy came over.

She held her arms out to him. "Daddy pick me up."

He smiled and did so. She had never known her mommy. Mommy had been a ninja and had died before she'd turned one. Daddy was everything to her. Daddy was warm and caring and kind. He always made time for her and he always said she was more important to him than anything. "Are you having a good birthday honey?"

She nodded eagerly. "Yes daddy! Daddy will I be a ninja someday like Itachi or like you?"

Her father smiled happily. "Of course honey! You are an Uchiha and my daughter; you'll get your sharingan and be a great ninja one day!"

She had a terrible thought. "Daddy what would happen if I never got my sharingan?"

He laughed and gave her a kiss. "Oh honey you will definitely get your sharingan! And even if you didn't I know you would still be a great ninja! The most important thing honey is that you always do your best! So long as you do that I will always be proud of you!"

She put her little arms around his neck and hugged him. "I want you to be proud of me daddy! I'll always do my best!"

Her father held her as he laughed. She was loved and happy. So long as daddy loved her she would always be happy.

---

She opened her eyes. The sky was getting light. She checked her watch. It was 6:08 a.m. about five and a half hours to go. She just lay there for a bit and looked up. Haku was still asleep and there was no reason to wake him.

---

The day was hot and it wasn't long before she was sweating again. Her tongue was sand paper. She just sat there played shogi and talked to Haku while she tried not to think about how thirsty she was. Haku truly was a very kind boy. She thought of the other teammates she'd had. She'd thought they'd shared a bond, but none of them had tried to stay in touch with her and were all probably glad when she'd gone. None of them ever cared. Her senseis didn't care, her father, her entire family didn't care. No one ever cared about a screw up like her.

"Haku, do you want me to be your teammate?"

He looked up from the shogi board. "Of course I do." He answered in surprise.

"Why?" she asked desperately. "Why wouldn't you rather have someone else? Someone better?"

"Because we are friends now and I would never abandon a friend." As he watched she shuddered a bit and he saw some tears leak out of her eyes. "Did I say something wrong?"

She shook her head. "No Haku you said something very right." She chuckled. "It's funny I don't have a drop of spit in my mouth but I manage to make tears. Funny huh?"

Haku shook his head. "No Gabrella I don't think tears are ever funny."

She smiled at his concern and quickly wiped away the tears. "It's o.k. Haku it really is." She glanced at her watch. "Just about two hours left to go."

---

Kushina arrived holding a bento and a thermos. She quickly crossed into the circle to Gabrella's side. Gabrella checked her watch. "It's only eleven thirty eight I still have six minutes to wait."

Kushina gave her the thermos. "It's enough Gabrella you've proven yourself to me."

Gabrella didn't want to argue; she swiftly unscrewed the thermos and brought it to her lips. It wasn't water but sweet tea and ice cold! She greedily drank it down. It actually hurt her throat a little but she didn't care. She emptied the thermos and looked at Kushina appreciatively. "Thank you!"

"It's quite all right. I have a couple canteens with water and this is yours as well." She handed over the bento. Gabrella thought it smelled wonderful but she decided she could wait just a bit now that her thirst wasn't consuming her anymore.

"Kushina-sensei can I ask you something?" Kushina nodded. "If I never get my sharingan, if I am never a great ninja, but I always give you my very best would that be enough?" She pleaded.

"Gabrella," Kushina put her hands on the girl's shoulders. "Of course it would! All that I have ever asked from you is that you give me your full effort. You can be a fine ninja without a kekkei genkai, my husband was considered the greatest ninja this village ever produced and he never felt the lack. Be the best ninja you can be and I promise I will be very happy that."

Gabrella nodded. "Kushina-sensei, I know I've screwed up terribly. And I know I don't deserve it. But I beg you to give me just one last chance!" She took a kunai out and cut her left palm open. "I swear on my own blood that if you give me one more chance then I really will give you my best at all times! I won't make any more of those stupid mistakes and I will try to be a really good ninja and a really good teammate!"



Kushina took her hand and performed a medical jutsu to heal her cut. She gave Gabrella a gentle smile. "My dear you don't need to ask. You've *earned* another chance. I'll make you a promise. I'll do everything in my power to help you be the best ninja you can, and I will never hold it against you that you lack the sharingan."

Gabrella nodded gratefully, and believed Kushina would keep her promise.

---

"So what's the verdict?" Tsunade asked.

"She is staying my student." Kushina said firmly.

Tsunade knew it was a mistake but wouldn't argue. "You'll be sorry."

Kushina shook her head. "No, I really don't think I will."

# Preparations

The month long interlude until the finals passed quickly. All the various participants were busy and found themselves with much to do. In the week leading up to the finals Konoha's hotels and inns filled to near overflowing and everywhere there were strange faces and odd accents. In lands far from Konoha preparations also went ahead.

---

"Ku, ku, ku, I thank you for your hospitality Kazekage-sama." He sipped the rice wine.

"You are most welcome Otokage-sama." The Kazekage sipped of the wine as well. "It is good for allies to sit and share a meal before the start of a great war."

"Yesss it is. I am most pleased to know that your doubts about our venture have been dispelled."

The Kazekage nodded. "Yes I will admit I was prey to some doubts. After all the idea of having to be seated next to one of Sannin as my forces invade her village was worrying. However what has now occurred I view as a blessing. With Gaara's fool actions I shall be at the head of my army as it attacks the Leaf village."

Orochimaru smiled. "A bit of a wild one is he not? Your son."

The Kazekage frowned. "He has my blood but he is *not* my son. He is but a beast. In that, if in nothing else, Tsunade was correct."

"Oh dear! Such loathing and hatred I hear in your voice. It makes me wonder why you did not have the lad killed long ago."

The Kazekage frowned but said nothing.

"In any case I am truly pleased you did not try to back out of our arrangement." Orochimaru laughed lightly. "Otherwise I might have had to kill you and take your place."

The Kazekage sent him an annoyed look. "I do not find that amusing."

"My apologies, my humor is often misunderstood."

The Kazekage shook his head. "In any case let us have a toast." He lifted his cup. "To the humbling of the Leaf nins and their insufferable pride."

Orochimaru lifted his own cup. "To the utter destruction of Konoha."

The two kages clinked their cups and drank, sealing their bargain.

---

"You and your squad will be going on an extended mission to Tea country. It is expected to last at least a week." Iruka stated.

"I see." Kurenai accepted the mission file from Iruka and glanced at it. "Doesn't look too difficult."

Iruka frowned. "No, it's a rather pedestrian recovery mission for a local lord. But for some odd reason your team was specifically requested."

"That is a bit odd. Especially considering I've never heard of this lord before. Still, a mission is a mission." Kurenai said.

"But Kurenai-sensei!" Sakura spoke up. "We'll miss the finals of the Chunin exams! I had two tickets and I was hoping to go with Sasuke-kun!"

Sasuke sighed. "Sakura, we can't refuse a mission just because the timing's inconvenient."

"But..."

"Sasuke is correct." Shino added in his staccato voice. "This mission has priority over personal indulgences."

Seeing she was defeated Sakura just nodded and hung her head. Kurenai was pleased that things had been settled without her needing to intervene.

---

His mom, Tsunade, Jiraiya, and Kakashi were all staring at him as he sat in the Hokage's office. They all said that this was just a small examination, but he had the distinct feeling that a talk with Ibiki would feel similar.

"So how many times have you been able to summon the, 'red chakra?'" Jiraiya asked.

"Well I get extra chakra whenever I get angry. But the red chakra has only actually appeared twice. The first time was when I was attacked by those Jonins back in the academy and the other time was in Wave country where Kakashi saw."

"Are you able to summon it any time you like?" Jiraiya questioned.

Naruto shook his head. "No it only comes when I'm really, really angry. And as soon as I stop feeling angry it goes."

"Any after effects when it leaves you?"

Naruto shrugged. "I just feel weak. I've noticed that the more of it I use the weaker I feel when it goes."

"I see." Jiraiya said seriously. He was the only one asking questions. The others were just listening to everything that was being said. "Kakashi mentioned, 'arms' that came out of the red chakra to attack and kill your enemies. How did those work exactly?"

"I don't know." Naruto answered truth fully. "When I have the red chakra it feels like a part of me, like another skin. I just think of what I

want and it does it."

"Kakashi said you made six at once. Do you think you could have made more?"

"I could have made ten."

Jiraiya raised an eyebrow. "Ten? Not eight, not twelve, ten?" Naruto nodded. "You seem very certain of that number."

"Well I know that's my limit for making arms."

"Did you make that many the first time?"

"No, the first time I had no idea I could do it. I just made one sort of on instinct."

"So you've never made more than six then?" Jiraiya questioned.

"Nope."

"Then how do you know you can make ten but not eleven?"

Naruto thought about it. "I don't know, I just do."

Jiraiya shared a look with the others. "Hmmm," Jiraiya slowly nodded to himself. "Kakashi felt a strong evil taint from that chakra. It was easy to tell it was demonic. When you gain the red chakra do you sense that?"

Naruto shook his head. "Evil? No, I feel... powerful and all my senses are heightened and I can move like lightning. But after awhile I start to feel..."

"What?"

"My body starts to ache. It's like if I keep the red chakra too long I start to get used up."

"Do you feel pain?" Tsunade asked.

Naruto shook his head. "No, I don't feel pain. It's more like I can just tell my body is starting to reach its limits."

"All right Naruto. I want you to relax for a bit while I examine you." With that Jiraiya cast a jutsu and placed his hand over Naruto's seal. After about ten minutes he finally ended the jutsu and withdrew his hand.

"Well?" Kushina asked nervously.

"The seal is still firmly in place but it has weakened a bit making it easier for Naruto to access the Kyuubi's chakra." Jiraiya stated.

"Is there any chance of the seal failing?" Tsunade asked.

Jiraiya shook his head. "No, though in a few years it may need to be recast." He paused to consider. "I could add a layer to what's there now. That would completely prevent any of the demonic chakra from leaking through."

"I think that would be a good idea." Kushina said.

"No." Naruto said flatly and began to rebutton his shirt.

The four other people in the room looked at him in surprise. "Naruto I don't think you truly understand how dangerous this red chakra is to you." Tsunade said to him.

"Godmother I understand that it's dangerous to me. But do *you* understand that without it I'd be dead now?" that had them looking at one another. "The first time I would have definitely died without it. The second time I would have been defeated and probably died then as well. If I were to run up against someone like Gaara or a really powerful Jonin my only hope might be the red chakra. I can't risk losing such a powerful asset."

Jiraiya frowned. "He has a point." He looked at Tsunade. "That red chakra of his really is one hell of an ace in the hole."

Tsunade frowned. "It is but the dangers it represents..."

"If there were any danger of me losing control to the Kyuubi then I would be the first to ask that it be resealed. But when I use the red chakra it's me that's in control, an angry me but me."

Tsunade considered it. The world was not a safe place for any shinobi but *especially* not for Naruto. When he said he might need that extra power he might well be right. She let out a sigh. "Very well. For the time being we will leave it as is. But from now on Jiraiya will be examining your seal each year and should there be any danger at all of the seal failing then he will reseat it."

Naruto nodded.

---

Neji sat on a bench in the Hyuga courtyard looking out at the sunset. His crutches were leaning against the bench beside him. The Hokage had assured him that in time he would be able to walk with only a slight limp and would be able to have a normal life. He chuckled to himself. *Yes I could be a fine carpenter or mechanic.* He shook his head at the irony of it all. He had always known how cruel fate could be. He had been born into the cadet branch of the Hyuga, his father murdered to save his uncle, and he'd had the curse seal placed on him. Yet in spite of that deep in his heart he had longed to prove to one and all that even if he was in the cadet branch he was the most powerful of the Hyuga. He had dreamed of defying his fate. And fate had punished him in the cruelest way possible. *I was given just enough time to glimpse what a great shinobi I might have been. And then it was taken from me in an instant. It seems my birth was no mistake. I was never meant to be great.*

In the sky he saw a couple birds flying free. He quickly looked away.

---

"Hey you!" A loud voice called out.

Shikamaru lifted his head to see a somewhat familiar blonde girl climbing the hill towards him. "Who me?"

She stopped and glared. "Do you see anyone else on this hill?"

He looked her over lazily. *She's kind of hot, but I bet she's really troublesome.* She was blonde after all and the blondes he knew (Ino, Naruto, Tsunade) were all loud, energetic, and troublesome. Still... "You're the sand kunoichi, Temari right?"

"It's Temari." She corrected. "And you're my upcoming opponent Shikamaru."

He nodded. It was true though he hadn't given it much thought. "What can I do for you?"

"I had to leave before your match so I don't know your abilities."

He shrugged. "I use shadow jutsus to take over control of my opponent's body. Anything else?"

She just stared at him and began to turn a bit red. "What do you think I'm an idiot?! You expect me to believe that just because you say so?"

He sighed. This girl could give Ino lessons in being abrasive. "Fine." He ran through some hand signs " **Shadow Possession Technique.**" His shadow stretched out and before she realized it she was caught. "There, believe me now."

*I don't believe this I can't move!* She looked at the boy who had just taken her with no effort. True, she hadn't actually come here expecting a fight. But for a ninja being taken by surprise was not an acceptable excuse. "All right you've convinced me, now let me go."

Shikamaru smirked. He knew he'd regret it, but for some reason he wanted to play with her for just a little bit. Mimicking his movements



he stood up and then sat back down again compelling her to lie down in the grass near him. "Since you've come all this way why don't you join me for a little while?"

"Hey what do you think you're doing?!" She panicked as she was helpless and he had her lying down on the grass. "Listen you pervert I swear if you try anything I'll beat you to death with my fan!"

He chuckled. "Relax, all I want is for you to watch clouds with me for a few minutes and then I'll let you go."

"Watch clouds?" She said mockingly. "What kind of brainless idiot would do that?"

He felt a small spark of anger. "And what is wrong with watching clouds? They have a far better existence than we do."

The jutsu allowed her to turn her face just a bit. She was able to see the upset look on his. "You're serious! You actually spend your time watching clouds?"

"That's right."

"Why aren't you training? Or working on jutsus? Or doing something else that would help you in our match?"

"Too troublesome," he answered. "Anyway shouldn't you be glad I'm not doing any of that stuff?"

"I'm just wondering what kind of shinobi would actually spend his time watching clouds."

"A lazy one."

She laughed. He looked up and of course she did as well. "What?"

"I just thought you had a nice laugh."

She gave him an evil grin. "Listen you idiot if you think flirting with me will somehow get me to take it easy on you during our match you can forget it."

"I'm not flirting with you and the truth is I really don't care whether or not I win our match." He set his head back down and so did she.

"You don't care about winning?"

"Nope."

"Tell me something. How did such a lazy and unmotivated ninja manage to get to the finals?"

"I have no idea, it's a mystery." She laughed again. *Damn, she really does have a nice laugh. Not like that braying of Ino's.*

"Anybody ever tell you that you should train a lot harder?"

"Only my mother, my teachers, Naruto, Hinata, Kiba, Kushina, my sensei, my teammate Ino and a few others."

"Well feel free to add my name to the list."

He chuckled. "All right I've tortured you long enough." He ended his jutsu. "You're free now." He'd expected her to stomp off, but she instead remained where she was. "I said you were free."

"I heard you." She sighed. "The truth is I'm on my own. My teammates and my sensei left after the preliminaries and no one has come back. I've done nothing but train for the last three weeks and I'm bored." She chuckled. "I'm so bored in fact I find looking at clouds to be entertaining. And I still have another week to go." She paused for a bit. "Besides you're not as annoying most guys."

"Gee thanks." She laughed again. He lifted his head to look at her. *She'll probably say no, but what the hell?* "Do you know how to play shogi?"

"Yes, my sensei taught me."

"Want to have dinner with me and my family? Afterwards we can play."

She looked at him in surprise. "You're actually inviting me to have dinner with your family?"

"Why not? Do you want to come?"

She considered it for a moment. *He's kind of cute in a dorky sort of way. He doesn't compare to that Naruto though. Still...* "O.k. but you have to realize two things. First you have no chance at all with me and if you try anything I'll snap you in half got it?"

He looked at her and lifted an eyebrow. "Does that mean you're not going to scrub my back?"

She put her head back and roared. When she was finally able to talk again she continued. "All right and second, understand that I won't take it easy on you in our match just because I'm breaking bread with you and your family."

He nodded. "All right, since we're being so up front with each other there are two things you should know. First off I never take it easy on opponents in Shogi."

"Fine and what's the other thing?"

"You'll be meeting my mother and she is the scariest woman in the world." She laughed as though that were joke. He shrugged, he'd warned her.

---

Kushina was wrapping up a training session with her team. Since passing her test Gabrella had improved markedly. She had lost her sarcastic attitude (well mostly) and truly worked hard. Kushina had not failed to notice that she no longer called Haku, 'kid' and the two

of them seemed to have gotten closer. They had completed two C-ranks without difficulty.

"Good training session you two. The finals of the Chunin exams are in two days. I've decided to go ahead and give you the next two days off as a little reward for all your hard work. By the way Gabrella do you have plans to attend the finals?"

"No sensei." She gave her mouth a little bit of a twist. "I don't rate sitting with my clan in their section."

Kushina smiled. "Well it just so happens the Hokage has invited me to sit with her in her private box. So I won't need my ticket. I was going to bring Haku with me so we could cheer on my son and his team. Why don't you and Haku go together?"

Gabrella smiled and turned to the boy. "Well I'm game. What do you say Haku?"

He smiled widely. "I would like that very much."

"Well that's settled then." She handed Gabrella the tickets. "You two have fun!"

---

"You know you don't have to keep walking me back to my hotel each night."

Shikamaru shrugged. "A gentleman does not let a lady walk home alone. Ow!" He rubbed the top of his head. "What was that for?"

"That was for thinking I *need* anyone to watch out for me." Temari informed.

"Hmph, well good night." He turned immediately to leave.

She sighed. "I had a good time." She called after him.

He stopped and looked back at her with a smile. "So did I. Again tomorrow? It's the last night before the exams."

She nodded. "I'd like that." He casually waved to her and left. She stood there outside the hotel and watched him go. As strange as it seemed, she liked him. She liked his family too. His father was lazy but sweet and funny. His mother was indeed a bit scary, but she was loving and protective of her family. She liked all of them and it had amazed her that they had welcomed her even knowing she would be fighting their son. The Nara's were good people. They weren't the enemy, and yet they were. She shook her head and hurried inside.

---

The following afternoon, the day before the finals Baki finally returned.

"Where have you been?" Temari asked upset but also very relieved. "I thought you wouldn't even be here for my match."

He leaned in close to whisper to her. "There will be no match Temari. Since Gaara will not be in the arena there is no reason for you to be either. We are leaving immediately you'll meet with Gaara about five miles from here."

She felt the blood drain out of her face. "Then," she whispered just as quietly. "The operation is still on?" She'd hoped it would have been cancelled.

Baki nodded once. "It is. Adjustments have been made but it goes forward as planned. Now let's go back to the hotel."

She made a decision. "Sensei I will meet you at the hotel in twenty minutes!" She leapt away before he could respond.

---

"Shikamaru!"

He opened his eyes to see Temari leaping towards him. "Hey Temari. Have you come to watch some clouds with me?"

She knelt down beside him and shook her head. "No, I've come to bring you some really good news." She gave him a smile though it was not heart felt. "It looks like you're going to win your match tomorrow."

"What? You mean you're going to let me win?"

"In a way. My government is pulling me out of the exams."

"What?!" He was so excited he actually sat up. "They let you train here all this time just to have you boycott at the very last minute? That makes no sense."

She shrugged. "Well whether it makes sense or not my orders are to leave the village immediately."

"Wait a minute! Are you not even coming to dinner tonight?" She shook her head. "Then this is good bye?" He suddenly felt a weird empty feeling in his stomach.

"This is good bye. I shouldn't even be here right now. But you and your family have been very kind and I thought I owed you at least this."

He looked at her face and suddenly realized he would miss her terribly. *When did that happen? I've only known her a week!* "When will I see you again?"

She looked at him in surprise and stood back up. "You won't, this is good bye." She turned to leave.

"I thought you liked me."

She stopped. She slowly turned back around. "I do like you Shikamaru; I wouldn't be here now if I didn't." She looked at him and knelt back down beside him. "Shikamaru we are ninjas from two

different villages. You knew from the start that when the exams were over I'd be going home."

"Yeah, I guess..." he sighed. "I guess I didn't want to think about that."

She looked at him sadly. "Well the future has a way of coming whether you want it to or not." She looked at him. "Shikamaru, I want you to know something, whatever happens tomorrow and after tomorrow I truly liked being with you and your family. If you should ever wonder please know that is the truth." She reached out and hugged him. "Stay safe you lazy baka ninja!"

He looked at her in surprise. "You don't need to worry I'll get through the finals just fine."

She let go and smiled. "Of course you will, but just in case." She leaned in too fast for him to do anything and she pressed her lips to his. His lips were very soft. When she pulled back and opened her eyes she saw the stunned look on his face. "For luck." She whispered. Then she got to her feet and leapt away. She moved as fast as her legs would take her. She heard him call her name but she didn't stop or turn around.

---

Naruto woke up an hour early. He was way too excited to go back to sleep. He showered, dressed, and got downstairs for breakfast with his mom and Haku. When he got done he was ready to leave and meet everyone. The two of them wished him luck as he hurried out the door. He hurried over to the Hyuga mansion where he met Hinata. Hand in hand they went to the bridge where they met Kiba and (amazingly) Kakashi right on time. Then together as a unit team seven headed for the arena. Naruto and Hinata were walking hand in hand as they usually did. As they approached the huge structure he could feel his heart pounding.

He looked to his girlfriend and smiled excitedly. "This is going to be an amazing day Hinata-chan! This will be a day we will always

remember!"

He had no idea.



## Opening act

Gaara was standing off a ways from everyone else, just like always. Baki approached him slowly and carefully. Gaara was staring off into the distance in the direction of the Leaf village. At least he hadn't started talking to, 'mother' yet. "Gaara," Baki called to him.

"What?" Gaara did not bother to turn around.

"You understand that you are the key to this battle? Everything depends on you."

"I know, now leave me alone." Gaara said brusquely. Baki nodded and withdrew. He returned to report to his master.

"Gaara seems relatively calm and under control." Baki reported.

The Kazekage frowned though it was hidden beneath his veil. He was not in his formal kage robes for one did not go to war in such. He wore a sand colored vest and pants with many pouches for scrolls and weapons. "Everything with Gaara is always, 'relative' except danger of course. Very well everything remains on schedule. Go ahead, take your position and be ready."

Baki nodded and disappeared in a swirl of wind and sand.

---

Kankuro was humming a happy tune as he did a little last minute maintenance on his puppet.

"How can you be in a good mood?" A sharp tone questioned.

He calmly looked up from his work and saw Temari standing over him frowning and upset. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"We're about to start a war here!"

Kankuro chuckled. "I do realize that sis, but it's not like this is the first time we've ever been in a fight."

"This is different; a lot of people are going to die today for us and them. And nothing says we won't be among the dead."

Kankuro shrugged. "That's true every day when you're a ninja. You become shinobi and you take your chances. I'm as ready as I can be and I'll be careful when we go in. And if that's not enough?" He shrugged again. "Then being gloomy now won't make a difference. Anyway I thought you'd be eager to get going."

"No," she said flatly. "I'm not eager for causing so much useless death and destruction."

Kankuro eyed her carefully and took a quick look around to make sure no one was listening. "Careful what you say." He spoke quietly. "That sounded defeatist and you can get into trouble even with who you are."

She frowned knowing Kankuro was right. "Of course," she answered in a little more than a whisper. "The truth is always dangerous."

Before Kankuro could reply Baki appeared near them. He frowned at Kankuro. "Are you *still* working on your puppet?"

Kankuro sent him a reassuring smile. "No need to worry I'm just doing a little last second maintenance."

"Get done with it quickly. We begin in thirty minutes."

"Where are our allies?" Temari asked with a frown. Her father had agreed to this as a way to eliminate his main competition and revive the economy of their village. But he would never have done anything on his own without the incessant goading of Orochimaru. It was he that was the mastermind behind this attack and this war. So far as she was concerned they were all being used to help that damn snake settle some scores.

"He is with his troops outside the walls. At the signal Sound ninjas will attack from within and from without on the east wall as we attack the gate on the south wall. So far all is going according to the new plan."

"That'll change." She said with depressing certainty. She had never been eager for this. When Baki had first announced the plan to attack Konoha she had argued against it. But once the decision was made she resigned herself to do her duty as well as she could. She looked towards the Leaf village and thought about Shikamaru and his parents. She hoped they would survive.

---

Tsunade smiled as Kushina sat next to her in the private box. "You know if things had gone differently the Kazekage would be sitting there right now."

Kushina smiled. "Well I'm sorry that I'm only a clan head."

"Are you kidding? Do you think I wanted to spend a couple hours with that stuffed shirt?" She frowned a bit. "Do you know he decided to pull his own daughter out of the finals just yesterday? It's a bad sign and I'm afraid our relations with Sand may suffer."

"Are you regretting your decision with Gaara?"

But Tsunade shook her head. "No, given what he did there was never a chance he would be allowed to compete. I stand by my decision one hundred percent." She smiled wanting to change the subject. "And how was my godson this morning?"

Kushina laughed. "Bouncing off the walls. I think he got up about an hour early. He is absolutely eager to get to it."

"Well of course he is!" Tsunade said happily. "Chunin is another step closer to Hokage. I'll tell you the truth if anyone else but Naruto wins this tournament I'll be amazed."

Kushina looked at her. "While I'm sure Naruto would appreciate the support shouldn't you at least pretend to be a little more impartial?"

"I managed to resist the urge to bet on him, that's as impartial as I can manage."

---

"This is where we part ways." Kakashi told them as they approached the arena floor entrance. "Do your best. I'll be cheering from the stands."

Naruto gave him a smile bursting with confidence. "Hey you know we will!"

Kakashi smiled at them. "Oh and do keep in mind that even though only one of you can be the last one standing you only have to look impressive to those judging you to be promoted."

Naruto looked at his teammates. "Hinata-chan, Kiba, we're going to have to fight each other at some point. Let's think of it as a really awesome spar and do our best. And no matter how it ends no hard feelings."

"Of course not Naruto-kun." Hinata agreed.

Kiba grinned. "Just remember you said that after I kick your but."

With confident smiles the three of them entered the arena floor.

---

They had agreed to meet at the stadium. Haku was already seated when he spotted her. He was so surprised he actually had to stare for a bit to make sure it was really her. "Gabrella?"

She smiled at him. "Who else?"

"Wow! You look really beautiful!"

His simple compliment made her blush a bit and smile wider. "Arigato Haku! Do you like my kimono?" She twirled a bit to show it off to him. It was made of finest silk. It was a dark navy blue with light colored flower imprinted on the lower half. She had also put her hair up and put on some make up.

"It is lovely." He said. "I have never seen you out of your ninja gear before."

She sat down next to him. She didn't fail to notice that she was receiving her share of interested looks from the men in the audience. "Every kunoichi is still a woman, and every woman likes to dress up every once in awhile." She looked out onto the field below where seven Genins were lined up with their proctor. "I take it I haven't missed anything yet."

"No, they have yet to start. You haven't met Naruto or any of his teammates yet have you?"

She shook her head. "No, I haven't. I kind of get the feeling Kushina-sensei is a bit nervous about introducing me to him."

Haku frowned a little. "Well Naruto has some hard feelings towards the Uchiha clan."

Gabrella sent him a mischievous little grin. "Well at least we have that much in common." She looked at him for a moment. "Say Haku how old are you?"

"Fifteen why?"

"Oh I thought you were around thirteen or so." She sighed. "It's too bad that you're my age."

"Why?" He asked confused.

With a wicked smile on her lips she wrapped herself around his arm and leaned into him. She batted her long eyelashes and spoke in a

low and husky. "Well I was sort of hoping I could be the older more experienced woman who teaches you about love. What do you think, hmmm?"

Having her so close he suddenly felt his temperature rise and his heart begin to beat faster. He was looking into her brown eyes and feeling a mounting panic. "Uhm, I uhm..."

She giggled and with one finger gently tapped the bridge of his nose. "Just kidding." *Maybe*. She sat back into her seat, but left an arm around his. He looked at her arm nervously. "You don't mind do you?" She asked innocently. "Teammates and friends should be close after all."

"Oh, no I don't mind Gabrella." He paused a bit. "I like being close to you." He said quietly.

She smiled and was about to say something when the crowd began to stir. It looked like things were about to begin.

---

Kabuto sat back in his seat and relaxed. His henge made him look like a heavy set man in his late thirties. Just another civilian who had come to see the show. He smirked. Everyone in the crowd thought the battles taking place in front of them would be the day's entertainment. Little did they realize that these matches were nothing more than an opening act. He looked at his watch. In a little less than twenty minutes the real show would begin.

---

"Forgive me my Lord, but do you truly think this is wise?" Kimimaro asked.

Orochimaru chuckled. "Yesss, I am very certain. This is a day I have been working towards for fifteen long years. Since the cursed third lord forced me to flee. I intend to enjoy my moment of triumph to the utmost!"

"But Lord why can we not be there to guard you?"

Orochimaru smiled and activated his red eyes with three little black tomoe in each. "With this body I am invincible. I want to see the terror in their eyes as they realize they cannot even touch me. The sound five will lead the attack, that is your role Kimimaro."

The white haired ninja sighed but bowed. He wanted to protect his master but could not disobey a direct order. "Yes my Lord."

---

Hayate coughed. "Well now, let's begin the first match. As in the preliminaries I may stop the match at any point I determine someone is hopelessly beaten. Once again do not count on my intervention. Should you feel yourself to be out matched yield immediately."

Ino sent her opponent a big smile. "I've been looking forward to this for a whole month! I'm taking you out Hinata-chan!"

"Byakugan," she dropped into her jyuken stance. "That's typical of you Ino you talk a good game but you never manage to back it up."

"Shut up! I am so going to kick your ass Hinata-chan."

Hinata sent her a hard look. "You know Ino I never did thank you for trying to steal Naruto-kun's first kiss. So you know what? I've decided to take something from you that you value greatly."

Hayate sighed. The crowd was starting to boo. "If it wouldn't be too much," cough. "Trouble do you think the two of you could fight now?"

Hinata needed no further encouragement. As she charged straight after the blonde. From the start Ino's only chance was to catch her opponent with a mind control jutsu. Unfortunately Hinata knew that and gave her absolutely no chance to cast one. She closed in and used her gentle fist to shut down Ino's chakra. Once that was done Hinata dropped down and took her feet out. Ino found herself face down with Hinata kneeling on her back.

Ino saw the kunai in Hinata's hand and an evil glint in her pale eyes. "All right Ino! This is for trying to steal Naruto-kun's first kiss and for the way you still flirt with him even though you know he's taken."

"Hinata! What are you going to do with your kunai?"

Hinata smiled, and for once in her gentle life, it was an evil smile.

---

"I think she's going to do it!" Kiba cried out.

"She wouldn't! Not Hinata-chan!" Naruto was stunned.

"Hey, Ino's been asking for something like this for years now." Shikamaru pointed out. He seemed to lack sympathy for his teammate.

Naruto had seen many terrible things, but this was too horrible. "I can't watch!" He shut his eyes. The roar from the crowd told him. And if there was any doubt Kiba dispelled it.

"Wow she actually did it!" Kiba cried out.

Naruto opened his eyes and looked at the scene below. "I can't believe Hinata-chan actually did that!"

Kiba laughed. "We must be rubbing off on her."

Naruto looked at him. "Is that a good thing?" Kiba shrugged.

---

Despite her quick defeat Ino was on her feet and shaking a fist absolutely furious with Hinata. "You tramp! You slut! You stupid ugly girl!" She screamed at a calm and smiling Hinata. Ino had just been humiliated and the fact the crowd was still laughing did nothing to soothe her hurt feelings.

Hinata held out her right hand. In it she still held a long blonde pony tail. She let go and allowed the hair to scatter in the wind. "This was



for trying to steal his kiss and for not leaving him alone even though he was taken. Understand it Ino; I love Naruto-kun and he loves me. I **am** going to marry that boy one day and I won't let anyone try and take him away from me." She turned and walked away. *That was fun!*

Hayate shook his head. "Will," cough, cough. "The next contestants Rock Lee and Namikaze Naruto come down?"

---

Kakashi smiled to hear the excited buzz rising as the two approached Hayate. He would never admit it to his team but he had bet heavily on each of them to win their opening matches and on Naruto to win the tournament. By the end of the day he fully expected to have made a small fortune.

"Kakashi my eternal rival." An all too familiar and all too upbeat voice called out.

He turned around to see him approach. "Hello Guy." Kakashi actually liked his weird friend and had tremendous respect for him both as a ninja and as a teacher. He just wished he would be a bit less enthusiastic about things.

"Yosh! Kakashi are you ready to see my prize student defeat yours?"

"Hmmm? Oh I'm sorry, did you say something?"

Guy frowned. "Hah! Cool as ever I see. But the fact remains that my Lee has prepared like never before and he will defeat Naruto."

"Guy you do realize that Naruto is favored not only in this match but to win the tournament?"

"That only proves that people do not understand the power of youth!"

Kakashi smiled beneath the mask. "You realize that Naruto is younger than Lee don't you?"

"Yosh do not mock me Kakashi!"

Kakashi eyed him in green leotard and bowl cut. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"So Kakashi shall we make a wager on which of our students possesses the greater power of youth?"

"All right, but not for money. I have plenty of that coming in. How about we agree that if Naruto wins we call a halt to our contests for six months."

"WHAT?!" Guy screamed. "You want to call a halt to our eternal rivalry?"

"Just for six months. What's the problem? You're not suddenly falling prey to doubts about your student's, 'youthful fires' are you?"

Guy frowned and calmed down. "No, I have faith in Lee. Very well Kakashi I accept your terms but when Lee triumphs I expect us to have all out taijutsu spars every day we are both in the village for six months."

"Every day?" Kakashi paled a bit. The way Guy sparred Kakashi would be nothing but a walking bruise.

His rival smiled smugly. "Now who is prey to doubts?"

Kakashi sighed. "Not me. Deal?" He held out his hand.

"Yosh it is a deal!" Guy grabbed his hand and gave it three or four pumps. Their bargain was set.

Kakashi looked back down to the arena floor. *You had better not lose Naruto. Otherwise I'll have to introduce you to an ancient fighting move called thousand years of death.*

---

"So that's Naruto huh?" Gabrella asked. "I guess it would have to be since he has the same outfit as Kushina-sensei."

Haku nodded. "That is indeed Naruto."

"So he's the one who defeated you and convinced you to come here? My cousin Sasuke hates him." She gave Haku a big smile. "So I have two reasons to really like him."

Haku smiled and looked excited. "This should be very interesting! Lee is a great ninja but Naruto is truly amazing. Watch closely and you will see a true genius!"

---

"This is it!" Kushina leaned forward in her seat.

Tsunade leaned forward as well. "I really should have put some money on this."

"Tsunade!" Kushina chided.

"I'm kidding... mostly."

---

Lee bowed to him. "Naruto! Let us have an excellent match and do our very best!"

Naruto returned the bow. "Right back at you Lee."

"Before we begin Naruto-san there is something you should know."

"What's that Lee?"

"I have removed my weights."

"Huh?"

Hayate dropped his arm. "Begin."

Lee was standing there and seemed to disappear. The very next instant Naruto felt a fist smash into his jaw and send him flying. When he landed Lee was standing before him in a ready pose. He flipped his hand in a, 'come on' gesture. "Lee was that a jutsu?!"

Lee smiled and shook his head. "No Naruto-san, I simply removed the weights I always have on. Without them I am a good bit faster."

*Good bit faster? He's at least as fast as me when I have the red chakra!* He quickly ran through some hand signs. " **Shadow Clone Technique.**" Fifty clones appeared surrounding Lee. As one they charged in from every angle. What worried Naruto was the fact Lee looked happy. Once again Lee seemed to vanish. There was a long series of pops as the clones swiftly disappeared one on top of the other. The real Naruto was again slammed in the jaw and sent flying.

Naruto quickly got back up on his feet. *Well that was a waste.* He began making hand signs. "Let's try an area attack this time. **Wall of Wind Technique.**" The entire area in front of Naruto was suddenly filled with a gale force wind. Lee was caught and thrown back a ways. But when he landed he was unhurt and still smiling eager for more.

Naruto quickly went through the dozens of jutsus he knew. A genjutsu would definitely work on Lee. But unfortunately he didn't know any. He had a powerful area wind attack jutsu that Lee wouldn't be able to avoid. But if he used it Lee would die so that was out. *Damn it I need something fast or I'm going to end up on the receiving end of a Lotus.* Naruto could see Lee starting to loosen the bandages on his arms. He knew Lee exceptionally well and knew all his strengths and weaknesses. He was familiar with one glaring weakness in particular. And as soon as he recognized that chink in Lee's armor he knew how he could win their match without resorting to lethal force.

"I'm very sorry Lee, but with that insane speed of yours you're just too dangerous. I'm ending our match right now." He made a couple

simple hand signs and worked a henge. With a puff of smoke he turned into a certain pink haired girl wearing a two piece swim suit.

"Sakura-chan!" Lee was frozen in place.

He worked some more hand signs and fifty clones appeared. All of them exact copies of Sakura in her two piece. They closed in on him and began a mass cuddle while telling him how strong and manly he was.

The poor bastard never had a chance.

In short order Lee was passed out on the ground with a stream of blood coming from his nose and a huge smile on his face. Naruto headed back towards the balcony a little embarrassed but triumphant.

---

"What do you call that?!" Guy shouted in outrage.

Kakashi grinned. "I'd call it no challenges for six months."

---

Kushina had her head buried in her hands. Tsunade was patting her shoulder comfortingly. "It's all right the important thing is he won his match." Tsunade said.

Kushina lifted her head just enough to give her friend a very flat look. "He's received training from me, Kakashi, you, and Jiraiya. He knows almost a hundred jutsus and has unbelievable chakra capacity. He is a Jonin in everything but title and *that's* how he wins a match?!"

Tsunade chuckled. "Look at the bright side think what a great story this will make for the grandchildren!"

---

Gabrella turned to Haku with a grin. The entire crowd was roaring with laughter. "Genius huh?"

Haku shrugged. "Genius can take all forms."

She laughed and grabbed his hand. "Come on lets get some snacks before the next match." She didn't fail to notice the blush that covered his face as she led them towards the concessions.

---

In one of the upper sections of the stadium seats Jiraiya jumped to his feet and cried out. "That kid's a freakin' GENIUS!!"

---

Kabuto stepped away from his seat and went to the back wall. While everyone's eyes were focused on the arena floor he began a complex series of hand signs.

---

The sand ninjas were all a healthy distance from the sphere of sand. Kankuro wasn't smiling now, no one was. They were more frightened of what was about to appear than they were of all the ninjas in Konoha. Within the sphere a demented and lonely voice whispered. "I'm a good boy aren't I mommy? All for you mother, all for you. Yes... yes I will... am I good mommy? Say it again mommy. Tell me you love me." He let out a contented sigh. "Say you love me again mommy and I'll give you all the blood you want."

---

"So what do you call that?" Kiba asked with a grin.

"A win." Naruto said simply.

Shikamaru smirked. "Congratulations on creating your very first original jutsu. What are you going to name it?"

Naruto thought about it for a second and grinned. "I think I'll call it the, 'ninja harem.'" As he spoke he noticed something strange.  
*Feathers?*

Hinata was the first one to understand. "Genjutsu!" She brought her hands together to dispel. "Kai!"

The others on the balcony quickly followed her example.

"Kai!" Naruto.

"Kai!" Kiba.

"Kai!" Shikamaru.

"Kai!" Tenten.

Naruto looked about confused. "Why are they casting a genjutsu on us? Is this some kind of test?"

"Byakugan," Hinata activated her bloodline. She looked about.  
"Naruto-kun! It's not just us! This genjutsu is being cast over the entire audience!"

Naruto got to the railing and looked towards the nearest stands. He could see people who had been walking suddenly collapse on the stairs. "Guys, I have a very bad feeling about this."

---

Guy stiffened. "Kakashi! This is..."

"Yeah, genjutsu." Kakashi agreed. The two elite Jonins quickly dispelled the effects.

"What do you think?" Guy asked and looked about at the other Leaf ninjas who were also dispelling the genjutsu. "A sneak attack?"

"It has to be." He pulled out a kunai but waited to release his sharingan.

---

They were in a long line to get some rice balls when people in front of them began to slump to the ground. Gabrella saw feathers and

wondered what was happening. She was getting very sleepy.

"Kai!" Haku dispelled and quickly touched Gabrella, freeing her as well.

"Huh?" Gabrella suddenly snapped out of it. "What the, what's going on?" Everyone around them was lying on the floor.

"I think we're about to be attacked." Haku had senbons in both hands. "Someone cast a very powerful genjutsu to put everyone to sleep. I can't think of a reason to do that unless it were the opening to a sneak attack. I'm glad Kushina taught me to always have my gear on me."

Gabrella slapped her forehead. "Of course! The *one* time I decide to dress up!"

---

Jiraiya dispelled the genjutsu and had memories of sneak attacks during the third great ninja war. "Oh no this can't be!"

---

Orochimaru smiled. "Well then, shall we begin?"

Kimimaro lifted a flare gun and sent a single flare high into the air. It lit high above Konoha and was clearly visible to friend and foe alike.

---

Tsunade saw the flare. (The genjutsu's effects did not reach the Hokage's private box.) "What is that?" And then without warning in the stadium and outside the village walls it began.

Operation, 'Destroy Konoha' was underway.



## Orders of the Hokage

Orochimaru ran a kunai over the tattoo on his arm. With the blood on it he slammed his hand down upon the ground. " **Summoning Technique.**" In a massive puff of smoke a gigantic gold and black snake appeared. Leaping onto its head he laughed and ordered it to approach the walls of his old home. Behind him were the forces of the Sound village, those that were not already within Konoha.

---

They heard the first crack and many of them could feel their hearts stopping. The sphere was breaking open. With a sudden explosion and monstrous howl a massive figure made of sand began to take shape. Shukaku the one tail demon walked the earth again.

Looking up at this horror the Kazekage wondered to himself for the thousandth time if he had done the right think all those years ago. No, there was no point in idle speculation now. The dice were out of his hand.

"You know the plan! Follow in Gaara's wake and destroy whatever he leaves behind." He tried to cheer himself with images of a crushed and beaten Leaf village and of his own village once more prosperous. He would make it happen! Gaara began to move and they all fell in behind him.

---

Throughout the crowd at the stadium unconscious, 'civilians' shed their disguises and stood revealed as Sound ninja. Their mission was to try and eliminate as many enemy forces right from the start as possible and thus make the battle that much easier. They rushed in to engage those Leaf nins who were still conscious. There would be no prisoners today. Their Lord's orders were quite clear on that. They had come to destroy the leaf village not merely conquer it. And so they set out to kill.

---

As Tsunade watched a dozen Sound ninjas leapt from the stands towards them. "What the hell?!" Tsunade shouted.

Kushina was on her feet with a sword out. "We're under attack!"

The Chunin who had been assigned guard duty had a kunai out and was at the Hokage's side. "Hokage-sama please flee!"

"Like hell I will!" Tsunade concentrated chakra into her right hand. "If these fools want a war they've got one!" There were ANBU stationed throughout the stadium but nothing like this had been expected. They had been caught completely by surprise. The ANBU would get there to reinforce them but not before the enemy were on top of them.

---

As Naruto and the others watched they saw fighting erupt throughout the stands.

"Hey look!" Kiba pointed at a group of enemy ninjas. "They're going after the Hokage!"

Naruto and the others had been taken completely by surprise. But Kiba's words made his decision of what to do easy. His katana was out and he looked at them. "All of you follow me!" He leapt away and made a bee line for the Hokage's box. It said something about him that everyone in that balcony obeyed him without a second's hesitation. Not only his teammates but Tenten and Shikamaru as well.

---

The first two to reach the box were immediately cut down by Kushina's blade. The third was crushed by Tsunade chakra enhanced fist. A sudden spray of needles forced them to duck behind the stone railing. And let the rest of their enemies reach the box. The Chunin who had been with them was quickly dispatched though he did take one enemy ninja with him. Tsunade and Kushina found themselves back to back surrounded by eight enemy ninja.

Given their skill levels it might be interesting. But before they could make a rush two of them had kunais blossom in their throats. One turned just in time to have his head sliced off by Naruto's katana. A shadow leapt out and caught the five remaining ninja. Kushina, Naruto, and Tenten quickly dispatched four of them.

"I want a prisoner!" Tsunade ordered. Her words came just as Kushina's blade neared his throat. She was just able to stop.

"Mom! Godmother are you all right?" Naruto wanted to know.

"We're fine honey how are all of you?" Kushina asked.

"We're all fine." Naruto replied. "Mom what the hell is going on?!"

"That is an excellent question." Tsunade said as she grabbed the sole surviving Sound nin by the throat. "How about an explanation?"

"I'll tell you nothing." The prisoner gasped.

"That's the wrong answer." Tsunade replied. She put her other hand on the man's shoulder and used some chakra. The man howled in pain. "Let me explain something to you tough guy! I'm a medic nin and I know where all the body's pain receptors are and just how to make them work full force. I need to know what's going on and I need to know right now and I don't care how much I have to hurt you to get that information." She worked some more chakra and the man was again screaming. For the Genin present, even Naruto, this was a sudden and brutal introduction to one of the ugly necessities of shinobi life.

It took less than a minute to have the man talking and as they all listened they realized just how serious things were. In that minute a squad of ANBU arrived as well as Jiraiya. As if on schedule they heard a loud explosion and felt the earth shake. From the box being so high up they had a clear view of the outer walls. Through the east wall a gigantic snake had just smashed through. Simultaneously on

the south wall at the gate a massive raccoon of sand was tearing things up.

"Damn it!" Tsunade screamed.

---

They had no sooner guessed what was going on then two ninjas wearing foreign hitai-ites appeared. Spotting them Haku threw his senbons at them. One went down with them in his throat. The other was fast enough to block them with a kunai. That one rushed forward and Haku went forward as well to meet him. The enemy ninja was bigger and stronger than Haku and managed to get a hold of him and they grappled. Gabrella was about to join in when she spotted a third ninja pop up behind them in the hall. Seeing what was going on that one pulled out a kunai and sent it flying right for Haku's back.

*No! Not Haku!!* On sheer instinct she leapt. She **had** to stop the knife! And as she leapt time... seemed... to... slow... down. The kunai came into sharp focus and she could see exactly where it was headed. And as it neared Haku's back she reached out her hand and caught it.

The enemy ninja was stunned. He was even more stunned at the speed with which the girl in the kimono snapped her wrist back and sent it flying straight into his throat.

Even without weapons she had no trouble helping Haku. She simply drove her fist into the enemy ninja's face. Once he was off Haku the two of them quickly defeated him.

"Are you all right Haku?" Gabrella asked. She was relieved to see him nod. She quickly knelt down by the defeated ninja and checked his pouches. "Kunai, shuriken, explosive notes, wire, gauze, heh," she smiled up at Haku. "These bastards are well prepared at least." Haku stared down at her in surprise. She quickly removed the ninja's belt and pouches to put them around her kimono.

"Gabrella your..."

"I know, I know I'm stripping the dead but it can't be helped. You don't expect me to fight without any equipment do you?"

Haku shook his head. "No, it's not that. Your eyes."

She tied the belt on and made sure the pouches were all secure. "Well that's better. Now what about my eyes?"

"They're red."

She froze. She was kneeling in front of the concession stand. She looked at her reflection in the polished stainless steel. She could see herself clearly. Her eyes were indeed red and in each pupil there swam two tomoe. She honestly couldn't believe it. After all the time, effort, and suffering. "Sharingan," she whispered.

---

"We've been caught completely by surprise!" Tsunade ground out.

"Hokage-sama what are your orders?" The lead ANBU asked.

She looked down into the stands. There was a desperate battle going on right in front of her. Her instinct was to join in. Then she looked to where the sand demon and giant snake were tearing into the village. "Damn it," she muttered. "I have no choice. I need to get in control of my forces and set up a counterattack." She looked at the ANBU. "I need to get to the Tower and get in touch with all my ninja."

The ANBU nodded. "We will escort you there Hokage-sama."

Tsunade turned to Kushina. "We have a lot of good people who are stuck fighting here. Kushina stay here and help and pass on the word. When this stadium is secured and every enemy ninja is dead or prisoner bring every last available Leaf nin to the Tower. You'll be part of the counterattack."

"Hai Hokage-sama."

She turned to Jiraiya. She hated what she was about to ask. "Things are in chaos. I need time to pull everything together."

Jiraiya nodded. "You need me to buy you time."

"I do." She hated it. She was going to put him in extreme danger. But she had no choice.

He understood and simply and grinned. "Don't worry I'll take care of the snake."

"No! Not the snake! *He* will have to wait. Taking out the one tail demon. *That's* the priority. He's doing a lot more damage and has to be stopped immediately or there won't be anything left of the village."

Looking out he could see how true that was. "All right then I'll take out the one tail." He moved one hand to cast a shunshin.

"Please be careful." Tsunade pleaded.

He smiled and gave her a little wink. "Always." With that Jiraiya body flickered away.

Finally Tsunade turned to the five applicants who had come rushing in to help her and Kushina. Looking at their young faces she was faced with *another* decision she hated. "All right, you five, I hate doing this but desperate times call for desperate measures. Until the fighting in this village is over I am transferring all of you into a special squadron. As of right now you are all part of team Naruto and Naruto you are captain."

He gasped and stood straight. "Thank you Hokage-sama!"

She shook her head. "Don't thank me now. Thank me later by bringing everyone on your squad through alive and well. As captain they are your responsibility Naruto. Do you understand?"

"I do." He nodded seriously. "I won't let you down!"

*I believe you Naruto.* "I am assigning you an A-rank mission. In cases of surprise attack there are standing orders to evacuate all students and civilians to the cliff shelters. I want you to get to the academy and assist the teachers there with the evacuation. Then I want you to stay with the students and help guard them until this battle is over."

"The academy?" Naruto questioned. He sent a look to his mother. "Couldn't we stay here and..."

"Naruto!" Tsunade said sharply. That got his attention! "This is *not* busy work! I have no idea how bad the penetration is and those students are a high priority targets. Get to the academy and protect them! That is your mission and I expect you to carry it out like the Leaf shinobi you are." She looked at all the Genin. "I expect every one of you to fight for and defend this village!" Hearing that they all proudly nodded.

"We will protect the students no matter what!" He turned to his team. "All right! We're going in a five man diamond formation. I'll take point." Kiba opened his mouth but Naruto sent him a glare and he closed it again. "Hinata with your blood line you're best suited for rear guard." She nodded. "Tenten, Shikamaru, and Kiba in the middle and keep a sharp eye out. Kiba keep a sharp nose out. Tenten with your weapons skill you can be a major help. Do you have plenty of weapons?"

She nodded eagerly. "I'm loaded for bear!"

"All right then! Let's move out team Naruto!" With that the five of them leapt away.

Kushina watched them go and whispered a silent prayer for Kami to watch out for them.

"I'm sorry Kushina," Tsunade said. "But I have to use everyone I have to save the village."

Kushina gave her a sad smile and bowed. "Please do not apologize for behaving like a Hokage." She then leapt away and into the stands below to join the fight.

Tsunade frowned. "No wonder the old man wanted out of this job." She had just sent people she loved into danger. If anything happened to them it would be her fault. But the really horrible thing was that if it saved the village she would do it again. "Damn it let's go!" She and her ANBU escort headed for the tower.

---

The Sound nin came straight in at her. He didn't bother with feints or deception. It was just a straight on attack. She could see the smile on his face and could guess what he was thinking. Some stupid girl in a kimono had somehow not gone to sleep and had picked up a kunai. Why did men *always* underestimate women? Especially beautiful ones? Gabrella realized she shouldn't be annoyed as it gave her an advantage. His attack was easy to avoid and she got inside of his reach. At the very last second she saw fear in his eyes. Maybe he had recognized her skill level. Maybe he had spotted her eyes. Either way it was too late for him. She rammed her kunai through the bottom of his jaw into the base of his skull. His blood sprayed in her face as she stepped aside and let him topple over onto a fat woman who was peacefully sleeping. *She's going to wake up with a dead man lying on top of her.* Another sound nin came at her. This time she worked some signs. "**Spitfire Technique.**" Out of her mouth she spat out a small stream of fire that struck him square in the chest. He was quickly turned into a living torch and screamed, but not for long. She looked around for someone else to fight. She saw a sound nin with a couple senbons in his neck drop. Looking around she saw there were no other enemies nearby. There was still fighting going on in the stadium but the section they were in was clear. Along with Haku there were four other Leaf nins there.

With a temporary halt to the fighting she took the chance to catch her breath. She also took a quick look at herself. Her beautiful kimono was stained with dirt and blood. "Damn it!"



Haku was at her side immediately. "What's wrong?"

"This kimono cost 5,000 ryu! It's one hundred percent silk. This is the first time I've ever worn it and now it's ruined!"

Haku looked at her not sure how to reply. "Well I thought it was very pretty."

"Emphasis on was."

Haku's radio crackled to life. "Haku? Gabrella? Do you copy?"

Haku hit his send button. "Kushina-sama this is Haku, Gabrella is here with me."

"What is your status? Are you both all right?" Kushina's voice spoke.

"Kushina-sama we are both fine. We have been fighting but currently are having a respite." Haku said.

"Glad to hear it. I'm still fighting. Where are you?"

"We are in stadium section A-12." Haku reported.

"I am in A-1. I want you and Gabrella to try and get to me but don't take any foolish chances."

"Understood." Haku looked at Gabrella and pointed. "Section A-1 should be right there." They would have to circumnavigate about a quarter of the stadium and there was still plenty of fighting going on in the intervening sections. "This will be difficult." He obviously was ready to do whatever it took to reach Kushina.

Gabrella took a look to where section A-1 was and smiled. "Maybe not." She looked to the four other leaf nins. "We just got orders from our sensei to join up with her. You can come with us if you like." The other four were all older than she was, though none of them seemed to be of higher rank than Genin. One by one they all nodded, more

or less thinking it was better to stay together as a unit. "All right," she turned to Haku. "Do you want to do this the easy or hard way?"

He looked at her a little surprised. "So long as we still reach Kushina-sama the easier way would be better."

She smiled. "Right then, follow me." With that she leaped out of the stands and down onto the arena floor.

Surprised Haku and the others never the less followed her out onto the arena floor where they ran at top speed. "Kushina-sama said not to take any foolish chances." Haku pointed out."

"Our chances are a lot better running straight to her rather than trying to fight our way through eleven sections." Gabrella replied.

"But everyone can see us." Haku said.

"So what?" Gabrella replied. "I'm betting that they're all too busy to bother with us. Besides," she said happily. "We're here." Sure enough they leapt up into section A-1.

Upon arriving they noticed there were a lot more dead bodies in this section than there had been in A-12. They immediately spotted Kushina facing off with a sound nin. This was the first time they had seen her in live combat. As they watched her sword cut the sound nin's head off as neat as you'd please. The two of them hurried over and each flanked her. Gabrella was stunned to see her sensei's face completely soaked in blood and her sword was coated red. And at her feet were about eight bodies. All of them with their heads cut off. She gave each of her students a happy smile.

"I am very glad to see both of you all right." She looked at Gabrella a bit. "Oh I'm sorry you ruined your kimono dear."

Gabrella sighed. "It's all right." Before she could say anything more a sound nin charged at her. She had a kunai up and ready but before

she could move Kushina had leapt in. With one expert slice of her sword a ninth headless corpse joined the pile in front of them.

Gabrella's eyes expanded a bit. Kushina had made it look ridiculously easy.

"All right," Kushina called out. "We're just about done here. We'll press on to the next section and help clear that one out. And to the next one and the next one until we've cleared this stadium of enemies. Once that's done we'll rally to the tower and help clear the village." Gabrella noticed that though many of the ninjas fighting here were Jonins they accepted her orders without question.

One of the Jonins with some crazy silver hair and his hitai-ite over one eye came over towards her. "Kushina is this Gabrella?"

Kushina smiled. "Yes."

"Well I'm pleased to meet you. Your sensei has told me quite a bit about you. I am Hatake Kakashi."

"Kakashi? Kakashi of the sharingan eye?" She said in surprise.

He nodded. "I hope you won't hold that against me the way some of the Uchiha do."

She shook her head. "No, it's fine with me."

Kakashi smiled. "Glad to hear it." He paused. "Kushina I thought you said your student didn't have the sharingan."

"She doesn't." Kushina confirmed.

"Actually she does."

"What?!" Kushina looked at Gabrella.

Gabrella smiled proudly. "Surprise."

Kushina smiled and shook her head. "Well today is definitely the day for them. Come on let's clear out section A-2."

## True strength

He had not been in Konoha on that terrible night when the Kyuubi attacked. He'd been doing a little research in a remote spa in Grass country. The first he'd heard that the Kyuubi was threatening his home was on October eleventh. He'd raced back to Konoha in just a day and a half. Just in time to attend Minato's funeral service.

He'd heard many of the survivors talk about the raw power of the Kyuubi and how hopeless it had seemed to face it. Now looking at the Shukaku joyfully flattening entire blocks with a single paw he had a real understanding of what Minato and the others had faced that day. This was even worse than the Kyuubi's attack had been. Hundreds of brave ninja had died that night but the Yondaime's heroic sacrifice had stopped the Kyuubi short of the village. Standing on a roof top he could see and hear the mass of civilians running through the streets. There was an evacuation plan in place but the people were in an utter panic. He doubted if one in ten among them knew where they were headed. They just knew survival required they get away from *that*. And as the civilians ran brave leaf ninjas were trying to fight it. They had to know it was hopeless. That their stand was nothing more than suicide. Yet they were determined to sell their lives to try and give the people of Konoha at least a chance to get away.

He leapt forward toward the battle zone. He'd noted that none of the Sand ninja had put in an appearance yet. *Why should they?* He thought bitterly. *They probably plan to let the Shukaku flatten everything and then pick through the rubble.* He landed in an empty street near where the fighting was taking place.

"Lord Jiraiya!" A ninja with a scarred face landed beside him.

It took him a second to recognize him. "Is that you Ibiki?"

"Yes sir! Have you come to help?"

"I've come to take over. Pull everyone back; I'll handle things from here."

"But Lord Jiraiya how can you stand alone against *that* ?"

He smiled. "Because I *am* Jiraiya the legendary Toad Sage and Sannin! Now pull them back and thank the heavens I'm here!" Ibiki nodded and disappeared. In swift order the leaf ninja began to retreat past him. He smiled up at the monster as he bit down on his thumb. *Sorry you Suna bastards but it's **not** gonna be that easy! Even if I have to die I'm stopping you!* He flashed through the hand signs and slammed his hand down on the street. " **Summoning Technique.**" With a massive puff of smoke he found himself riding atop Gamabunta's head.

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His radio came to life with Hinata's panicked voice. "Naruto-kun! Four ninjas about to ambush us!"

Naruto stopped on a roof and held up a fist bringing his new team to a halt on the same roof top. He was about to ask Hinata where the enemy were when they attacked. The enemy obviously thought Naruto and his team were simply a bunch of kids running about in a panic. Their first clue that wasn't the case was when one of them died with a kunai through his throat. Another came straight at Naruto with a pair of kunai. Naruto performed some of the steps for the dance of the Lilies and drove his sword through his chest. The other two were quickly caught by Shikamaru's shadow.

"Great job team!" He walked over to the two prisoners. "We're going to the ninja academy can you tell us anything about your plans for it?" Both ninjas said they didn't know. He didn't think they were lying. But just to make sure. "Hinata-chan?"

"Their heartbeats didn't change Naruto-kun. They are telling the truth."

"Hinata-chan we're within two miles of the academy can you take a look?"

She nodded and did just that. What she found was very bad.  
"Naruto-kun the academy is surrounded by about forty enemy ninjas! And... there are dead bodies in the courtyard, a couple teachers but mostly students."

"What?" Kiba said. "You murderous bastards! Why are you going after the kids? They're not even ninjas yet!"

The first prisoner shook his head a bit which was all that the jutsu would allow. "We weren't part of that operation. Our squad was sent in to pick off any targets of opportunity. But it doesn't matter, you're all dead. Lord Orochimaru has ordered that this village be left an empty ruin and every last living soul in it killed. I guess the brats in the academy were just high on the list."

Kiba snarled. "That's pretty brave considering where you are right now."

"You're going to kill both of us anyway so it doesn't matter."

"We wouldn't do that." Hinata said. "We don't kill helpless prisoners."

The Sound nin actually smiled. "I can see the look in this one's eyes." He nodded to Naruto. "He's going to kill us."

"Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked worriedly.

"This is war Hinata-chan and the rules are different." He looked at her. "How are we supposed to take them prisoner? We've got a mission to complete and I'm not going to waste the time taking them to the police or ANBU headquarters *if* those places are even still secure. We sure as hell are not taking them with us and if we leave them tied up one of their friends may come along and let them go. I'm not taking the chance of letting them go free to kill others."

"Naruto-kun if we do this how is it different from what Gaara did in the forest?"

"The difference is that Gaara could have let those ninjas live and it wouldn't have done him or his team any harm at all. If I let these two live and they get away other people might die because of it and I **won't** let that happen."

"Naruto-kun it would still be murder."

The sound nin actually laughed. "And you call yourself a ninja? Ninjas kill, and believe me to the person you're killing it's always murder."

"We're wasting time here." Tenten ended the debate by throwing a kunai into each of their throats. "Hinata," she looked at the other girl. "Naruto is right. This is war. You heard it from their own mouths they've come here to kill everyone! We have to stop them no matter what! We have to kill Hinata, this is war and we have to kill." Hinata saw Kiba and Shikamaru both nod and she slowly nodded as well.

"Hinata-chan," Naruto said quietly. "There are bodies on the courtyard are there people still inside?"

Hinata nodded. "I'd say there are twelve instructors and maybe two hundred students."

"Do you think there's any way we can get into the academy?"

Hinata took another look. "They only have a couple ninjas in the back; most of them are lined up in front."

"Makes sense," Shikamaru said. "They must figure there's no way to get all those kids moving fast. If they try getting everyone out the back way they'd still be all over them."

"But the five of us should be able to move fast enough to get in." Naruto nodded to himself. "All right let's get to the academy."



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"Jiraiya! What is this about?" Gamabunta demanded.

"Hey Bunta, we need to take that ugly raccoon out."

Gamabunta flattened his eyes. "Shukaku the sand demon? Why should I go to the trouble of fighting him?"

"I'll buy you some sake!"

"Try again."

"Because we're lifelong pals?"

"Hah!"

"All right," Jiraiya said seriously. "How about because Minato gave his life to save this village? If we don't stop that ugly beach ornament this village is going to be destroyed and he'll have died for nothing!"

Gamabunta was silent for a moment and then rumbled a short laugh as he pulled out his sword. "Now *that* is a reason to fight!"

"Keep in mind the priority is not just to stop him but to protect the village. We need to lure him away from Konoha if we can."

"Got it. Now hang on!" Jiraiya focused chakra into his feet as Gamabunta leapt. Gaara has actually been enjoying himself so much he had failed to notice the new arrival. He had lifted his right arm to smash another city block to rubble when a gigantic sword swept in and cut his arm off at the shoulder. Both the arm and the sword went flying.

Gamabunta landed behind Gaara in a part of the village already flattened. "Damn I lost my sword. His sand body is too dense."

The Shukaku form swung about and faced the giant frog. "Who are you?" He demanded.

"I am the legendary Toad Sage Jiraiya and this is Gamabunta the boss toad summon. And we're here to put an end to you. Bunta give me oil!"

"Right!" Gamabunta's belly expanded and a river of black oil spewed from his wide mouth. Using a jutsu Jiraiya spat out a steady stream of fire turning the oil into an inferno that engulfed Gaara.

Gaara howled, not in pain but in frustration and anger.

Jiraiya watched the massive blaze and actually hoped it might be enough. "Do you think?"

Another deafening roar gave him an answer. The fire died away and left a massive pall of grimy black smoke. Out of the smoke stumbled the three legged Shukaku form. Gaara moved stiffly as his entire body seemed to shine brightly in the sun. The intense fire had turned the Shukaku's upper layer to glass. With a loud crack the glass broke and began to fall in great chunks. Gaara turned his snout towards the giant frog. He was absolutely furious now that someone had attacked him and actually done a small amount of harm.

"I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!!!"

"Time to lead him away I think." Jiraiya suggested.

"Right!" Gamabunta leapt southwards out of the village.

The bigger and slower Shukaku form gave chase. "Come back here and fight me!"

---

Before the fight had begun Temari had confidently predicted that things would not long go according to plan. But she had not imagined this. She and all the other Suna nins stared in shock as Gaara, their ace in the hole, their secret weapon, and the center of their battle plan abandoned them to go chase after a giant frog summon.

All the sand nins began to look at one another in a panic and soon all eyes turned to the Kazekage. He wanted to scream and to curse Gaara to the deepest dankest pit in hell. He couldn't do that though, his people needed their supreme leader to exude confidence and self control. He very quickly assessed the situation. Whatever his other faults he had a sharp mind and a good grasp of strategy and tactics. With Gaara's unexpected departure the battle plan was worthless. In essence the plan had been to let Gaara do most of the fighting and break enemy resistance. Suna had *a/ways* had a smaller population than Konoha. That was why they'd always had to rely on quality over quantity. He had brought a grand total of 500 shinobi and these included damn near every Jonin and Chunin the Sand village had along with the most talented and experienced Genin. Konoha had roughly about 2,000 shinobi of all ranks. The Otokage had promised to bring a thousand ninja. He did not know just how far he could trust Orochimaru. Even if he really had brought that many the quality of his ninja varied wildly. Sound was a new village after all and too many of their ninja were not experienced enough.

The Kazekage looked over his people carefully. He was well aware that this was a crucial moment in the history of Suna. His ninja were all still outside the now flattened walls. He not yet committed them to battle. Gaara had done quite a bit of damage and killed a number of enemy ninja. But there was no way to ascertain how many. Likewise his allies were clearly doing damage and killing enemies. But there was no way to guess how many. Unlike Orochimaru the Kazekage was not out to destroy Konoha. He would be satisfied with leaving it weakened and no longer a competitor for contracts. For him this was about restoring the economic health of his village. Clearly Konoha had already suffered from this day's events. But had they suffered enough? What sort of reserves did the Leaf nins still possess?

He had two choices. He could simply leave. Now that Gaara was off on some wild frog chase his plans were ruined. His forces had not stepped foot into the leaf village yet and had suffered no casualties at all. He could turn away from battle and return home with his entire force completely intact. He had no doubt that the sound nins would

fight on even if he abandoned them. He could achieve his dream of weakening Konoha without suffering any casualties.

He sighed. But if he did that the alliance with Sound would be destroyed. Orochimaru was a dangerous enemy to have as Tsunade was learning right now. And if Konoha somehow survived with much of her strength intact they would come looking for revenge. But there was one more critical factor to consider. *He* had led them here to fight. His people had come here in accordance to *his* will. What would they think of him if he told them to retreat now without even *stepping foot* into the Konoha? They would think him weak and afraid. There was no real choice. *Damn Gaara! I hope he finally dies then all this really would have been worth it!*

"Gaara has done enough!" He spoke loudly and with voice ringing with confidence. "The leaf ninjas are in confusion and fighting on two fronts! We will go in and finish this! Follow me and let us fight for the greater glory of Suna!" With that he led the way.

Temari followed in his wake along with the others. Her fan was out and she was ready, though not eager.

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The five of them were able to get in through the rear entrance without a fight. But the moment they entered Iruka and another Chunin were there about to attack.

Naruto held up his hands (one of them had a bloody katana in it.)  
"Wait Iruka-sensei! It's us!"

Iruka and the other Chunin held up for just a second. "Can you prove it?" Iruka asked suspiciously.

Naruto thought quickly. "Sasuke's a jerk!"

Iruka lowered his kunai. "Naruto, good to see you again. But what are you and the others doing here?"

"The Hokage sent us here to help you get the students to the shelters."

The other Chunin looked horribly disappointed. "Are things *that* bad? She couldn't spare one real squad?"

Before Naruto could answer that Iruka did. "Don't underestimate them, especially not Naruto. I think I'd rather have him here than almost anyone else." Naruto smiled. "Come with us."

In short order they were in the large hall right outside the main door. Everyone else was already gathered there. The Chunin instructors looked grim but determined. All the students were there too. Some of them were crying and he could hear soft pleas for mothers. A handful of the fourth year students looked determined and almost ready. Naruto noted that among those few were a Hyuga cadet branch member and an Uchiha. Naruto also did not fail to notice that everyone had been issued weapons.

"Their fear smell is off the charts. These kids are terrified." Kiba whispered to him.

"Can you blame them? They're just kids!" Naruto whispered back. It was a little odd saying that as the two of them had been here less than six months ago. But in the time since graduation they had grown up.

"Naruto!" one of the kids jumped up and ran over to him. "Have you come to save us?"

Naruto smiled down. "Yes we have Konohamaru. We're getting all of you out of here."

Konohamaru smiled. "I knew it! You'll definitely rescue us!"

"Don't be stupid!" An annoyed voice called out. "He's not much older than we are. He can't do anything against *real* ninja." The fourth year Uchiha declared.

"If you think that what do you think *you're* going to do?" Kiba said with a grin. The Uchiha turned a bit red and shut his mouth.

Konohamaru turned to glare at the same kid. "Shut up! He saved me before and I've seen Naruto in action. He's the best! If he says he can save us then he can!"

He put a hand on the young boy's shoulder. "Konohamaru," he said quietly. "Me, my team, and your teachers will get you all to safety. I promise." Konohamaru immediately nodded, certain everything would be all right now. Then went back to sit with his two friends.

Iruka spoke quietly. "That was a very large promise Naruto."

He slowly nodded. "I know it was Iruka-sensei and I never go back on my word."

"I think they're getting ready to rush us." One of the Chunin called. He sounded calm and resolute.

Naruto calmly wiped down his blade, there was a *lot* of blood on it. He holstered it. He knew what he had to do. He looked at the kids and at his teammates "All of you listen to me. I am going to show you a special power I have. It may seem very frightening, but don't be afraid." He stuck his thumb to his hitai-ite. "I'm a Leaf ninja and I will give my life to protect all of you. Whatever you see or sense don't be afraid of me."

"What special power are you talking about Naruto?" Shikamaru asked. Kiba and Hinata were both sending him worried looks.

Naruto took a very deep breath. "I'm what they call a jinchuuriki. Inside me I have the Kyuubi."

Tenten, Shikamaru, and the students all gasped. Kiba, Hinata, and the teachers eyed him with worry. "Naruto-kun!" Hinata spoke upset. "Why are you telling everyone that?"

"Because I'm about to show them and everyone else." He said quietly. "I'm going to have to use all my power to keep my promise." He gave Hinata a little smile. "And you know I can't break my promise no matter what."

"Naruto-kun..."

"I think I'd rather take my chances against the ninja." One of the teachers muttered.

"Quiet!" Iruka snapped.

"You're lying!" One of the students jumped up and pointed. "Everyone knows the Yondaime Hokage killed the Kyuubi to save the village!"

"No," Naruto said. "Biju cannot be killed by mortals. My father placed the Kyuubi inside of me. And I am going to use its power to protect all of you."

"But how..."

"Your teachers will explain everything later." He really didn't want to discuss it. He walked towards the door.

"Naruto are you sure about this?" Iruka asked nervously.

"It's the only way. Besides," he flashed Iruka a confident grin. "I've used the power twice now. It'll be o.k."

From the doorway he carefully looked out to the courtyard. He had a nice clear view of a dozen tiny bodies with kunai and shuriken sticking out of them. *Big brave ninja ambushing some unarmed children!* The sight was plenty to spark his anger. And from deep within him he felt something dark and terrible come to life.

---

"We're twenty miles from the village this should be far enough!"  
Jiraiya called.

"All right!" Gamabunta landed and turned about in some thick forest.

It took a short while for the Shukaku form to catch up to them. "Are you finally tired of running?!" Gaara screamed. He was furious; no one was supposed to be able to keep away from him like that! "You are my prey! Have you any idea how angry you have made me?!"

" *You're angry?*" Jiraiya shouted. "You can stuff it down the rabbit hole! 'Cause whatever you're feeling I guarantee you it's not a shadow of the anger I'm feeling! You traitorous bastards broke out alliance and betrayed us with Orochimaru! Our two villages had been friends since the end of the third great ninja war!"

"Friends?! Are you serious old man? There are no friends in this world! Everyone cares only about themselves! I love and care about only myself! Everyone else can burn and that includes my so called family!"

"If that is how you truly feel then I pity you! I'd rather be dead than not care about any one else! You can have all the power in the world but if you have no one you want to protect then you are still weak. A ninja only finds real strength when he is fighting to protect those dear to him!"

"YOU'RE CALLING ME **WEAK** ?!" Gaara screamed at him. "All right! I'll show you my full power then!" On the Shukaku's forehead Gaara's body seemed to half emerge. He remained planted in the sand up to his hips. He cast a jutsu. " **Playing Possum Technique.**"

"Oh no! This is bad!" Gamabunta announced.

"What?" Jiraiya asked.

"The host just forced himself to sleep."



"So?" Jiraiya asked.

Suddenly Shukaku laughed. "I'm free!! Oh and lucky me! I see someone I want to slaughter right off the bat!" He slammed his curled paw into his belly and disgorged a massive bubble of air. " **Air bullet.** "

Gamabunta leapt just in time to avoid the explosion as the air bullet struck the forest. His belly expanded and he spat out a huge bubble of water. " **Water Bullet.**"

Shukaku jumped away laughing as the water bullet missed.

"He's faster than before!" Jiraiya said.

"That's because with the host asleep the demon comes awake. He's much more powerful than he was being controlled by the host." Shukaku fired off a pair of air bullets. Gamabunta got off one water bullet. He took out one of the air bullets but the other struck him. "Ahhh!"

"Bunta!" Jiraiya shouted.

"I'm all right! But a couple more of those and I'm done. He's just too powerful for me!"

"What can we do?"

"He's got one weakness. The exposed host. If I can hold Shukaku in place for a few seconds can you reach him?"

"Yes! A few seconds will be all I need."

"All right. Since I don't have any claws or fangs to hold on with I'll need help to transform. I'm not very good at it so I'll need you to provide me the image of something to transform into."

"Not a problem!"

"Here we go then! Remember you'll have one chance to reach the host and wake him."

"Wake him?" Jiraiya held out his palm and began concentrating chakra. "Forget waking him! I'm gonna kill him!"

"That works too." Gamabunta dodged and just avoided another air bullet as he rushed in. "Here we go! **Joint Transformation Technique.**" Gamabunta was shrouded by a screen of smoke. Out of the smoke burst the form of a gigantic wolf. The wolf landed and clamped down his jaws while taking hold with both paws.

Jiraiya had his opening and leapt for the sleeping kid. " **Rasengan!**"

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More than two hundred eyes witnessed the red chakra leak out and cover his body. They saw him change and fangs and red eyes come out.

"He's a monster!" One of the children wailed.

"No he's not!" Hinata shouted at the boy. "He is Namikaze Naruto! He's a leaf ninja and a hero! What he's doing is to keep us safe! Don't you **dare** call him that!"

Konohamaru jumped up and faced his classmates. "That's right! Naruto would never hurt us! He's a hero and he's going to kill those bad ninjas!"

"That's right," a deep voice said. He turned a little bit and gave them all a good view of his features. They could feel the immense chakra with its evil taint just seem to fill the hall. Except for Kiba and Hinata they all eyed him with at least a little bit of fear, even Shikamaru and Iruka. "I'm going to kill those bad ninjas. You are all precious to me and I'll kill anyone who threatens any of you." With that he rushed out the doors and into the courtyard.

---

Seta turned to his teammate. "What the hell? Can you feel that?"

Karu nodded. "Of course I can. I've never felt a chakra like that."

Seta took a nervous look at the academy doors. They'd been about to rush in but the sudden feeling of that chakra stopped them. Seta wasn't all that eager with the assignment. He didn't particularly relish killing children. But Konoha had it coming. The whole village had it made itself Lord Orochimaru's enemy and so they all had to die.

"Look!" Karu shouted. Out of the doors had come one ninja. He was surrounded by a weird visible red chakra. The chakra reminded him almost of an animal's outline. There was even a tail. Seta and the other sound nins immediately launched a flurry of kunai and shuriken. They struck and bounced off. Three or four explosions followed quickly as kunai and with explosive notes were thrown. When the smoke from the explosions cleared the ninja was still standing there. He seemed to be laughing.

"Is that all you've got?" The leaf nin mocked with a deep and cruel sounding voice. "You're not fighting children now!"

A Jonin to Seta's right ran through some hand signs. He suddenly stood and held out his right hand. A bolt of lightning jumped from his fingers and covered the thirty yards to where the leaf nin was. The lightning struck home and exploded into a shower of sparks. The leaf ninja didn't even seem to take notice

"He's toying with us." Karu said. "He doesn't think we can hurt him."

Seta spoke nervously. "Maybe we should retreat."

They heard a deep laugh echo from the courtyard. The leaf ninja suddenly dropped to all fours making him seem even more like an animal. "I can smell your fear." He called out. "Let me give you something to really fear." He leapt and seemed to cover the thirty yards between them in less than a second. Just that quickly he was in among them. Seta and Karu both tried to run. His chakra seemed

to come to life and, 'arms' reached out from it. Seat and Karu were both caught. He wanted to try and surrender. Before he could even take a breath he felt his ribs being crushed and blood filling his mouth.

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There were thirty eight sound nins posted in front of the academy and two to its rear. Of the ones in front some tried to fight but most tried to run. None of them got away. The two in back witnessed the slaughter and came to the conclusion that their best course of action would be to report this to their superiors. They left in haste and got away from the academy as fast as they could.

Inside the academy the Chunin instructors had a partially obstructed view of the battle. In glimpses and flashes and in screams they pieced together what was happening.

"He's tearing them apart. He's literally tearing them apart!" One Chunin whispered.

"It's unbelievable, terrifying." A second whispered back.

"He is that, but right now I'm very glad that we have him."

The other Chunin thought about it and slowly nodded. "So am I."

After only five minutes it was all over. Naruto, his team, Iruka, and a couple other instructors assembled on the courtyard. Naruto was still surrounded by red chakra.

"I don't see any more enemy ninjas between us and the cliff." Hinata announced. "I think if we move quickly we can get everyone there."

"All right then." Iruka decided. "We'll get them moving. Your team can help us guard them Naruto."

Naruto nodded and performed some hand signs. Fifty shadow clones came to life. These were exact copies and had red eyes,

claws, and his other temporary features. All they lacked was the red chakra. Each one pulled out a katana and wakizashi and swiftly took up positions to help escort and protect the students. "My clones will protect you and so will the rest of my team. I have to go though."

"What? Naruto-kun you have an order from the Hokage!" Hinata said.

"I haven't forgotten Hinata-chan. My clones will help and I promise that if something starts destroying a bunch of them I'll get back to you in a flash. But with them the teachers, and the rest of the squad that should be plenty to keep everyone safe. With my power I need to do more! I'm going to go help anywhere some of our people are in real trouble!"

"But Naruto-kun..."

"You're in charge of the squad Hinata-chan." Naruto leapt away.

"Naruto-kun don't go!" Hinata shouted, but he was already gone.

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Jiraiya plunged his rasengan into the boy's chest. The red haired boy's eyes shot open. He saw shock and fear there. And then to Jiraiya's surprise, he thought he saw relief. The eyes glazed over.

"Nooooo!!" Shukaku howled. He stopped moving and the gigantic form began to dissolve and crumble into sand.

Jiraiya grabbed the boy and leapt away. Landing he put the boy down and gently shut his eyes. "I'm sorry kid. I know you didn't have a choice in this anymore than Naruto did. And I guess you never had someone like Kushina there for you." Jiraiya didn't even know the boy's name but felt sympathy for him. Only someone who had never known love could have said the things he had. For a jinchuuriki Naruto's up bringing had been the exception. Whatever this poor boy had gone through was more likely the norm. When the fighting was done he would come back here and give the poor kid a proper burial.

"Great job Bunta." He said tiredly. "Now we have to get back to the village and squash some snakes."

Gamabunta slowly shook his head. "I'm sorry Jiraiya but I'm about out of chakra. I wish I could stay and help you fight."

"That's all right you've done more than enough today! Thank you Bunta. The next time we meet I'll buy you a round!"

Gamabunta chuckled. "That you will." With a puff of smoke he was gone.

Jiraiya wasted no time and began leaping back to the village. It would take him twenty minutes to get there. He had deliberately had Bunta lead their enemy so far away so that even if they did fail to beat the one tail Tsunade would at least have the time to come up with something else. But having gone so far it would take him twenty minutes to get back. He hurried in the hopes he would get back in time to help decide the battle.

He wouldn't. Within those twenty minutes the battle and the fate of Konoha would be decided.

# The divine wind

**Author's Note:** I want to thank **SulliMike23** for coming up with the wind jutsu Naruto uses at the end of this chapter.

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From her office window she saw Gamabunta leaping away and the one tail demon chasing him. He had done it. Jiraiya had given her the time she needed to try and organize things. *You had better come back all right you damn pervert.*

"Lady Tsunade," Shizune spoke up. "I have Ibiki on the line. His forces are currently not engaged. He wants to know if you want him to shift eastward and help fight the incursion there."

Tsunade shook her head. "No! The Shukaku may be gone but we have to expect a conventional attack from Suna in that area. Tell Ibiki to hold in place. How is Danzo doing?" She didn't like or even trust him. But she was the first to admit that he was a tough old bastard and loved Konoha. She had no doubts that he would fight like to hell to defend the village.

"He has retreated another half mile. He says he estimates the enemy force to be about six hundred. He has only about eighty men. He says the best he can do is slow them down." Shizune reported.

Just slowing them down would be enough for now. "Tell him to do the best he can until I can send him reinforcements. Any word from the academy?"

Shizune nodded. "All the phone lines are still cut but we just got a radio report from an ANBU squad sent to check. They report a large number of dead sound nins along with a couple academy teachers and fourteen students. The rest of the academy population is gone."

"To the shelters?" Tsunade asked.

"That's the presumption but they don't know for sure." Shizune said.

"Tell them to go and make certain." Of course she knew that Naruto and his team carried radio communicators. What she *didn't* know was which frequency they were using and it hadn't occurred to her to ask him earlier. *I never thought the enemy would have so many units already inside the village and that they would cut our phone lines. I should at least have thought of the possibility.* "How many ninja do we have at hand right now?"

Shizune quickly scanned her notes. "About three hundred all of different ranks and not really organized."

Tsunade ground her teeth. It was like trying to get a herd of cats to move in the same direction. No one knew where anyone else was, squads were split up. Many ninja had hurried to the fighting on their own initiative, some were heading here to the tower, a good many would still be fighting in the stadium including some of her top Jonins, some had been ambushed by the enemy squads that were running wild, and some were probably running about like chickens with their heads cut off. She was sure she still had the forces to deal with this, especially now that the one tail was gone but creating order out of chaos was proving frustratingly slow. "Find someone to start organizing the troops we have and then send two hundred of them to help Danzo." Until she had more of her forces ready she had to be careful how many she sent where.

"Who do you want in charge of that?" Shizune asked.

"Kushina, Kakashi, or Asuma; but since none of them are here who do I have on hand?"

"Perhaps I can be of assistance." A comforting voice spoke.

She saw a very welcome figure enter her office dressed in black ninja clothing and helmet. "Old man you have no idea how happy I am to see you right now!"



He nodded. "I can only imagine. I am here to offer my assistance in any way possible. Just how can I help?"

"Go to the plaza and start getting our troops in order. Then pick out two hundred, assign a commander, and send them to support Danzo." She saw him smile. "Not you though! I want you to stay right here until I'm ready to lead the counterattack."

Sarutobi chuckled that his old student had been able to read him so easily. "All right I'll begin immediately." He left her office.

"Finally a good piece of luck. What about the clans have we heard back from them?" Tsunade asked.

Shizune shook her head. "Nothing new. We have not been able to reach Hyuga. Mikoto has sent us eight members of her clan but another dozen were at the stadium. Inuzuka and Aburame are sending some members while some have already gone into battle. As for Nara, Yamanka, and Akimichi they are also sending some members but the clan heads have already gone to fight."

"Well I hope they have their usual good luck."

---

Orochimaru chuckled and then laughed. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much *fun* ! "Ku, ku, ku well I must admit your team's reputation was well deserved. Even with my sharingan you kept me entertained for a full five minutes."

"How did you get the sharingan?" Nara Shikaku choked out. They had taken on Orochimaru and lost. Looking to his right he saw the bodies of his two comrades and best friends.

"I am a genius and have found a jutsu that allows me to possess the bodies of others." Orochimaru said happily.

Shikaku chuckled. "Well I suppose you really are a genius then. Too bad you're also such a complete cold hearted bastard."

Orochimaru laughed and added just a little bit of pressure to the sword that was resting against his neck. "You really have no fear of death do you?"

Shikaku took a last look up into the sky. It was beautiful and filled with clouds. *I love you Yoshino please forgive me for making you a widow. I love you son please forgive for making you grow up so soon.* "I am ninja."

"So you are. Any last words?"

Shikaku smiled. "Last words would be troublesome."

Orochimaru laughed and drove the sword into the man's throat. He'd honestly forgotten just how entertaining his fellow leaf nins could be. He swallowed the sword again and climbed back onto his snake. It was proving to be a wonderful day.

---

The girl was pleading. "Please no, don't!" Her back was against a brick alley wall and the ninja had a grip on both her arms. His face and arms were covered with strange black tattoos. "Please don't do this."

Sakon smiled, he did like playing with them first. "Oh sweetheart you should be thanking me! You and everyone else in this stinking rat's nest are going to die today. But at least you get to have a little bit of fun first." The girl was crying and desperately trying to push him away.

"You know you really are a piece of dog s&#t!!" Tayuya shouted at him.

Sakon sent her a smug little smile. "What? She's going to die no matter what. This way she gets to live an extra five minutes and I'll even make it clean."

"Five minutes? More like thirty f&#king seconds!"

Kidomaru laughed. "You talking from experience?"

"F&#k you!!"

Jirobo sighed. "Please watch your language." She sent him a dirty look. "Sakon what if Kimimaro or Lord Orochimaru find out about this?"

"Lord Orochimaru wouldn't care and Kimimaro isn't here right now."

Tayuya looked at her teammate with real hatred. "You f&#king as&#ole! We have to kill her you don't have to do *this* !"

Sakon laughed as he gently touched her cheek and saw her whimper. "I don't need orders for this." He smiled at the girl. "Don't struggle it'll all be over soon." He was leaning in when he suddenly froze. "What's that?" He and the other members all felt it; an unbelievable chakra brimming with a sense of evil. And a killer intent that impressed even them.

A gigantic arm that seemed to be made of red chakra reached down and grabbed Sakon.

"Hey!" he screamed. He struggled but couldn't move an inch. He was quickly lifted from the ground up to the edge of the roof. There he was brought face to face with a boy surrounded by red chakra. He had red eyes that burned with hate.

Naruto was as ready to kill an enemy kunoichi as he was any male ninja. But there were two women in his life who he loved and adored. Seeing what was about to happen he had imagined something similar happening to one of them. The result was a killer intent that made Sakon want to wet himself. Naruto gave the older boy a savage and feral grin. "Don't struggle," a second red chakra arm took hold of him. "It'll all be over soon." With that he tore the would be rapist in half.

"Holy s&#t!! He killed Sakon!" Tayuya and the other members immediately activated their second level curse seals.

Naruto noted the changes as he tossed the body aside like a sack of garbage. "I guess I'm not the only special one here." He leapt down to the street.

"We're the sound four! We're the elite warriors of Lord Orochimaru!" Kidomaru told him.

Naruto smiled. "You know I was thinking how elite your friend was as I tore him apart." Naruto was enjoying himself. He *wanted* to kill now. Not simply out of duty or a desire to protect. He was feeling a simple blood lust. In the middle of battle he did not stop to consider that this feeling was not normal for him. Normally he had to shut his heart off to be able to kill. But now he was relishing it. This was the longest he had worn the red chakra.

Kidomaru opened his mouth and spat out a thick stream of webbing. In short order Naruto was in a cocoon. "Die!" he chewed again and this time he spat out a long gold colored rock hard mucus. It struck the cocoon and simply broke off. Four chakra arms tore the webbing aside. Then two came together in a, 'clap' and crushed Kidomaru.

Jirobo was feeling real terror for the first time in his life. He was a pretty strong in close fighter but he wasn't getting anywhere *near* that monster. He cast a jutsu and slammed both hands into the ground. Out of the street a dome of earth rose and surrounded Naruto. Jirobo let out a sigh of relief. "All right we're safe now!"

"You sure?" Tayuya eyed the dome nervously; she could still feel his chakra and his killer intent.

Jirobo nodded. "No one has ever..." The dome exploded and they were both forced to duck.

"If you're going to fight me can't you at *least* come up with an original jutsu?" A red arm shot out and caught Jirobo's head. It snapped

back until there was a nice audible crack.

Tayuya leapt back and began playing her flute feverishly. She was the last surviving member of the Sound four and she wasn't loving her odds of living much longer. *Who the hell is this bastard? We were warned about Jiraiya, Tsunade and Sarutobi why didn't we get a warning about him?* She cast her most powerful jutsu and summoned her three Doki. Three large deformed demons stood before her.

Naruto laughed. "Well, that at least is original."

*Arrogant prick!* She altered her tune a bit. Her Doki opened their mouths and three ethereal snakes with multiple mouths began to drift towards him. Naruto made no effort to avoid them. And when each one latched on and bit he gasped to see the red chakra dissipate and fade where they bit him.

"Hah! So you can be hurt!" Tayuya shouted.

"I guess I can." *O.k. valuable lesson, some things can get through the red chakra. I'm not invulnerable.* "But don't get happy." He sent a red fist crashing into the chest of each demon summons and knocked them over. The ethereal snakes let go and he rushed forward with all his speed. Before her Doki could get back up he had her. He put his own right hand around her throat. With his left he snatched away the flute and then snapped it in half. The Doki vanished in puffs of smoke.

Tayuya clawed at his right arm with all her strength. It was like a small child trying to pull up an oak tree. She tried to curse him but couldn't even breathe. *This is f&#king it.*

Naruto felt the urge to kill her. But he was in control. He loosened his grip a bit to let her breathe. "You want to live?"

Her first impulse was to scream, 'f&k yeah I want to live!' But didn't think that would be a good idea when her life was literally in the palm

of his hand. "Yes."

"Then get out of this village and don't come back. If I see your face again you're dead." And then he let her go.

Tayuya quickly backed away from him as she rubbed her bruised neck. "Why? Is it because I'm a woman?"

"No, it's because you tried to stop what was about to happen. For that I'll show you just a little bit of mercy. Now get out of my sight."

She nodded and fled as fast as she could. She knew there would be no going home to Sound. Her Lord would not forgive her abandoning the battle no matter her reasons. *F&#k it. I'd rather be a missing nin then dead.*

Naruto took a quick look to see if the girl in the alley was still there, but she was long gone. He hoped she would have enough sense to head for the cliff shelters. He leapt up to the roof of the nearest building. As he got there he took a look at his left hand, it was starting to feel a little numb. It didn't hurt at all and he could still use it, but he could tell something was off. *I'm starting to reach my limit. Damn it I have to do more to help while I still have this power!* On top of the roof he looked about. He could hear and see explosions and fighting coming from two directions. To the south where the gate used to be and to the east where he could see a gigantic golden and black snake leveling buildings. The fight to the east looked a lot more serious especially with that monster. But the fighting to the south was a lot closer to him. He looked at his left hand again. *I'll do as much as I can. I don't know how much longer I can hold on to it.* His decision made he moved south towards the sound of the fighting.

---

Shizune ran into her office. It was a mad house as aides and ANBU rushed in and out to carryout her orders. "Lady Tsunade! Eight members of the Hyuga clan have just arrived!"

Tsunade smiled, they would be a major help. "Did Hiashi bring them here?"

Shizune smiled. "No not Hiashi."

Neji walked in without his crutches but with a noticeable limp. He offered the Hokage a respectful bow. "Hokage-sama please forgive me. When the phone lines were all cut and it became clear we were under attack I thought it likely that you would be using the tower plaza as a staging point. I was able to convince some of the cadet branch members to come here."

"Neji you have no idea how much you've just helped me and the village. Thank you!"

He bowed again. "I am glad to have helped." He let out a sigh. "I realize I can no longer fight, but is there something I can do?"

Tsunade nodded immediately. "You have a sharp mind and I can use that, go down to the plaza and report to the third Hokage you can assist him in organizing our forces."

"Hai Hokage-sama."

"And Neji, when this is all over I want you to come see me. I have something I want to discuss with you later." He nodded and limped out of her office.

An ANBU captain entered with a radio communicator. "Hokage-sama patrol squad five has confirmed that the academy students are now safely at the cliff shelters. As per your instructions I have team Naruto's leader available on the general ANBU frequency."

"Good!" She took the radio communicator. She was relieved to know they had made it safely to the shelters. She just wanted to talk to Naruto for a minute to be satisfied he and the others were safe. (Well safe as possible in a war zone.) "Naruto are you and your team all right?" There was a short pause. "Oh Hinata! Are you and the others

all right?" She nodded. "Let me talk to Naruto for a minute... well the original obviously, why would I want to talk to a clone?" Her lips came down in a frown. "What do you mean he's not there? Where is he exactly?" As she listened her face darkened dangerously. "HE DID WHAT?! Hinata what radio frequency is he using? Yes... oh yes he is in trouble! You and the rest of your squad stay where you are and carry out my order and protect those students. Out." She flicked off the radio and reset the frequency. "Damn it Naruto I don't have time to baby sit you now!"

"Is something wrong Lady Tsunade?" Shizune asked worriedly.

"You might say that. After doing an incredible job of defeating an enemy force that was attacking the academy he felt the need to go off on his own and play hero!"

Shizune gasped. "He's running through the village *alone*?"

Tsunade nodded. "But not for long." She turned the radio communicator back on to the new frequency. "Naruto! This is the Hokage report in right now!" She switched to the receive setting and waited a moment. There was nothing but static. "Damn it Naruto I know you're running around the battle zone all alone now answer me!" And this time when she switched her radio to receive she got a reply; though not one she wanted to hear.

---

They had just cleared section C-15. Kushina estimated it wouldn't take much longer to finish securing the stadium. As they cleared each section she added more leaf nins to her force. She had about a hundred and fifty now and they were clearing the last quarter of the stadium. As they headed towards D-1 she noticed Gabrella had picked up a sword. Before she could comment on that she saw her take on a sound nin with it. She performed a perfect thrust and killed him. Kushina was stunned at the obvious skill and ease.

"Gabrella!" Kushina called. "Why didn't you tell me you'd had sword training?"



She grinned a bit embarrassed. "Well, actually sensei this is the first time I've ever even picked up a sword."

"What? But your attack was perfectly executed."

"Well, I've been watching you this whole time with my sharingan active and I've been able to copy all the moves I've seen."

Kushina shook her head. "I can't believe I didn't think of that. But I don't want you to fight with a sword anymore, rely on kunai and jutsus."

"But why not sensei? After seeing what you can do with one I want to use a sword too."

Kushina smiled. "Well that's very flattering. But for the time being while we're in real combat you should rely on the fighting style you're used to. There is a lot more to sword fighting then just the moves. You don't know anything about creating combinations or in working the proper forms. The middle of a battle is not the place to start experimenting with a whole new fighting style."

Gabrella nodded. It made sense, but she had discovered that she liked the feel of a sword in her hand. She also wanted to fight like Kushina did. "Sensei, when the fighting is done. Will you teach me how to use a sword?"

Kushina smiled and nodded. "I'd be happy to, but we're not quite done here yet."

Kakashi was standing nearby when his radio sparked to life. "Naruto! This is the Hokage report in right now!"

Kakashi chuckled. "It sounds like Naruto is in trouble with the Hokage."

Kushina sighed. "Just so long as he is not in trouble with the enemy."

The Hokage's voice came through again. "Damn it Naruto I know you're running around the battle zone all alone now answer me!"

"WHAT?! HE'S ALONE?! Kakashi what frequency are you on?" Kushina demanded.

"1550." He replied.

Kushina switched to the proper frequency. "Tsunade! What do you mean Naruto is all alone?! What happened?"

Back in the tower Tsunade slapped her forehead. *Of course Kakashi's radio would be set to the same frequency as his students' and I'll bet Kushina was standing right next to him.* "All right Kushina here is what I know..." Tsunade quickly related the information she had. "So right now I am trying to get in touch with him to order him back to the shelters and his original mission."

"I see." Kushina said. "Naruto! If you can hear me reply immediately or I swear I will ground you for a month!" She shouted.

---

Naruto grimaced and shut his radio off. Even heading into more life or death combat he found himself more worried about his mom being mad at him.

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"All right either he's turned his radio off or he's deliberately not answering." Tsunade finally said. "Kushina what is your status?"

Kushina let out a breath and hoped her son would not take too many risks. "I expect the stadium to be completely secured within the next ten minutes. I should have at least 150 ninja available many of them of Jonin and Chunin rank."

"All right get done there as soon as you can and then get here."

---

As they stormed into the next section of the stadium Gabrella got a quick word in with her teammate.

"Naruto ignored a direct order from the Hokage and went out to fight alone? So is he that brave or that stupid?"

Haku gave her a serious look. "Naruto always does what he thinks is right. He will do anything to protect people who are precious to him."

"Including disobeying the Hokage and going to fight alone?"

"So it would seem. Though if he saw it as necessary I am not surprised."

"Hmmm, you know the more I hear about him the more I like him." She sent Haku a mischievous grin. "You better be careful or he just may steal me away from you."

"Huh?" He looked worried.

Laughing she dived into the fight.

---

The fighting in the stadium was soon over as they met another force of about 40 leaf nins being led by...

"Riyuki! What are you doing here?" Kushina asked.

"This is where my clan's seats were. We have been fighting this entire time." Of the forty ninjas he led a dozen were of the Uchiha clan. Riyuki noted his daughter was there as well. Gabrella actually saw his eyes leave her and suddenly come back to her. "Gabrella! Have you achieved the sharingan?"

She nodded once. "I have father."

And there it suddenly was, like the sun coming out from behind dark clouds. Her father *smiled* at her. Her father *noticed* her. *All* the

Uchihas were smiling at her they were all noticing her. Now. "My daughter I am so proud of you! I knew you could do it!"

She stared at him. *Liar! You gave up on me a long time ago!* "Thank you father." She ground out. It didn't seem right to have a family argument in the midst of so many dead.

"When this is over dear we will have a celebration in your honor!" Riyuki declared and every single Uchiha with him nodded enthusiastically.

Gabrella knew there'd be a celebration. The Uchiha's celebrated the acquiring of the sharingan more than they did a birth or a wedding. So far as the clan was concerned it was a source of greater joy and pride. Her only reply was a weak smile. *I don't believe this, I **finally** get my dream and it doesn't mean anything to me. They don't care about me, not really. They just care about my acquiring the sharingan.* Gabrella compared her father's treatment of her to her sensei's. Her father had given up on her, washed his hands of her once he thought she was too old to acquire it. Who she was and what she did meant nothing to him. Kushina on the other hand had stood up to the Hokage for her sake. Kushina had given her a severe test, but once it was passed she had promised to help her regardless of getting her sharingan. Her sensei had actually seen her as a person and a kunoichi, rather than as a failure who could not achieve sharingan. And as Gabrella played these thoughts in her mind she realized that she cared far more about Kushina's opinion of her than her father's.

"We have orders from the Hokage to assemble at the tower as soon as the stadium is secure." Kushina said. "Let's go!" Riyuki did not like taking orders from *that woman*, but given the circumstances he simply nodded and followed.

---

"Back! Pull back!" Ibiki shouted. Ninjas began to fall back behind him as he and two squads tossed out kunai to provide cover. He had lost two more men so he thought he was down to 55. As the Hokage had

predicted the sand nins had indeed launched a strong conventional attack. Ibiki knew he didn't have the forces to stop them. He could only slow them a bit and make them pay a price. It was still a lot better than fighting the one tail. This at least was just a desperate situation rather than mass suicide.

That was when he felt a tremendous chakra approaching from behind.

"Have they gotten behind us?" One of his men yelled.

"Hold your positions!" Ibiki yelled. "Let's see who or what this is." And as he watched he saw a figure surrounded by red chakra running towards them on all fours. The outline of the visible chakra looked like an animal. He saw that there were even two distinct tails. As the figure approached someone threw a kunai at him. "Hold it! I think I know who this is."

"Who?"

"Namikaze Naruto, the Yondaime's son." Ibiki said quietly. That answer did not relieve the men of their fears. And sure enough when the figure came to a halt Ibiki could see that it was Naruto. Even with his demonic eyes and fangs there could be no mistake. The boy was still on all fours and seemed to be breathing heavy.

Naruto knew he was coming to his limit. His back ached and both hands felt numb. He was huffing air and felt tired. He'd never felt any of those things with the red chakra before. He knew he didn't have much more time with the power. He was determined to use it before it ran out. He looked up. "I remember you from the exams. You're Ibiki."

Ibiki nodded. "And you are Namikaze Naruto. Did the Hokage send you to support us?"

"Not really," Naruto replied. "I sent myself." He looked tiredly at the street in front of them. There were a few dead bodies lying out there

and he could see some movement about half a block away. "Are there a lot of enemy ninja right in front of us?"

Ibiki nodded. "At least a few hundred and they all seem to be very skilled."

"Good." Naruto said with relief.

"Good?" Ibiki looked at him.

"Yeah, I would hate to waste it." Before Ibiki could ask what he meant Naruto leapt away from the cover and out into the open street.

"Has he got a death wish?" One of the other ninja asked.

"With that sort of chakra? I doubt it." Ibiki said.

---

Temari was part of a thirty man unit pushing down a side street about five blocks away from the main effort. This was a flank attack that would hopefully catch the leaf nins by surprise. The attack was going well so far even though the leaf nins were resisting as hard as they could. Maybe they could make this all work out in the end.

"Do you feel that?" A sand nin near her froze.

Everyone could feel it. "What kind of chakra is that?" Temari asked.

"What do we do?"

Baki was in command and gave them all a harsh look. "We continue the mission." The way he said it there was no other possible course of action. Despite wondering about the strange chakra they pressed on.

---

Naruto got right in the middle of the street and then just stopped. Deliberately making himself a target. A rain of kunai and shuriken came down on him, quickly followed by kunai with explosive notes.

In the middle of this he actually sat down and closed his eyes. *Why am I so tired? I had plenty of energy just a couple minutes ago.* With his eyes closed he pictured himself in a grass field filled with plump rabbits. He imagined chasing them and devouring them, ah but their flesh was sweet! He heard a weird clicking sound and opened his eyes. There was a ridiculous looking puppet flying towards him spitting out kunai and needles. He frowned. Without even bothering to stand he sent out one red hand to grab and crush it.

"Are you going to fight me with toys?" He called out mocking

In response a ninja with a veil over his face jumped out and cast a jutsu. " **Wind Scythe Technique.** " Immediately the air about him lashed out towards Naruto. Naruto was mildly impressed, he knew this jutsu it was an A-rank wind attack jutsu designed for a single opponent. He could sense the wind buffet around him but the wind blades could not penetrate the red chakra.

It was time. Naruto stood up. With his enhanced sense he guessed there were maybe three hundred ninja packed in the blocks just ahead of him. Perfect. "That was a pretty good attack. I happen to be a wind type too. Let me show you one of mine." He began casting.

---

The Kazekage was the most powerful ninja in his village and knew just about every wind jutsu there was. He immediately recognized the hand signs. "Take cover!" He shouted.

But it was already too late.

Naruto formed the final sign. " **Kamikaze no Jutsu.**" (Divine Wind) The air before Naruto seemed to darken and grow heavy. Then it exploded forward with hurricane force ripping and slicing everything before it. Brick, stone, wood, and flesh were cut apart. The buildings in front of him were flattened as whole chunks of masonry were torn out and turned into lethal projectiles. Those who tried to run were caught by the hurricane winds and killed as they were either torn apart or crushed by the flying debris. Those who took cover were

killed as their cover was ripped away leaving them exposed to the killing wind. Those who tried to cast a defensive wind jutsu were killed as their jutsu was simply overwhelmed by the sheer force of Naruto's. In short, when the winds finally died down everything and everyone for five hundred yards in front of Naruto was gone.

Including the Kazekage, Sabaku no Kankuro, and about three hundred sand ninjas.



## Decision

Hinata was outside the cliff shelters with the rest of team Naruto. There was a steady stream of refugees flowing into the shelters. Along with the academy instructors and a couple dozen other shinobi who had been assigned to assist and guard the shelters. So far there had been no attacks on the shelters themselves, but people were telling horrible stories about sound nins slaughtering helpless civilians. If even half, if even a tenth of what she was hearing was true then she was glad Naruto had decided to kill those two sound nins. She kept a sharp eye out for more refugees, for any sign of the enemy, and for any sign of Naruto. Actually there were plenty of signs of Naruto. His clones were all around guarding and helping people reach the shelters. Many people were nervous at the first sight of him and his fierce appearance. But the majority soon seemed grateful to know so many ferocious looking clones were there to protect them. She let out a sigh.

"It's all right Hinata-chan." Kiba assured her.

"Kiba-kun what do you mean?" Hinata asked.

He smiled at her knowingly. "You're worried about Naruto aren't you?" She nodded. "Don't worry about him, it's Naruto afterall. I don't think the ninja's been born that can stop him!"

Hinata looked out at the village again. There were fires and smoke and the crash of buildings. As she listened she heard the sounds of a storm and some buildings falling near the south end of the village. "I'm sure he's all right but I can't help but worry." She said quietly. "Why did he do it?"

Kiba shook his head. "Because he's Naruto."

Hinata nodded. *Please be safe Naruto-kun!*

---

Tsunade nodded to the ninja assembled before her. She had sent two hundred ninja under Asuma to help Ibiki. Now she would lead the remaining seven hundred to deal with her old friend. By her side were Sarutobi, Kushina, and Kakashi. Hiashi had finally arrived and would be leading the contingent from his house. Shizune would remain in charge of things at the tower while she led her forces.

"All right!" She called out to them. "These bastards have hurt us but now we return the favor. We're freeing our village of these murderous bastards. Leaf ninjas! Follow me!" She leapt and her soldiers leapt after her eager to fight.

---

Temari got to her feet quickly. She and the rest of the force had been five blocks west of where that jutsu had been aimed and just the fringe of it had knocked them all down. Standing up she could see that entire buildings that had been standing just a minute ago were completely gone! "What was that?!" She screamed.

Baki looked around. "All right change of plans, follow me." He headed for the large chakra signature determined to find out what had just happened.

---

Pain!! He howled and dropped to his knees. Every muscle in his body seemed to be cramping at once. Naruto thrust his hands into the concrete and tore into it. Oh it hurt! He sucked in air trying to breathe. He'd reached it, his limit. Looking up he saw some more sand ninjas. They immediately took cover as Ibiki and the others behind him let loose with some kunai. They still wanted to fight.

Despite the pain he shut his eyes and tried to concentrate. There was still fighting going on here and at the other end of the village. In spite of the cramps biting down into him he thought there was just one more thing he could do. *One more, just one more and I'm done.* He could sense the red chakra was trying to slip away but he held on to it through sheer force of will. He had to hold on to it for just one more jutsu. His hands didn't want to work; the fingers didn't want to

bend to form the signs. But slowly and carefully he finally managed to form them.

He put all the chakra he could and cast his last jutsu. He felt the chakra throb and fight like a living thing against him. But it worked. And with that he fell face forward into the street and the red chakra left him. His eyes closed immediately and he became unconscious. The last thing he heard was a deeper version of his own voice.

"It's o.k. we'll take care of everything."

---

She rode atop Katsuya the queen slug summon with Sarutobi, Kushina, and Kakashi. As the individual ninjas behind her fanned out to take on individual sound ninjas Katsuya went for the large snake being ridden by Orochimaru.

"Use your acid Katsuya!" Tsunade spoke.

"Yes my lady." Katsuya spat a stream of acid. Orochimaru leapt away even as the snake was struck and dispelled.

He landed on a nearby roof where he was quickly joined by Tsunade and her compatriots. He smiled at them. "Well now, this does feel like a reunion. So good to see you again Sarutobi-sensei, Tsunade, Kakashi." He looked at the woman with the extremely long red hair and sword. "I don't believe we have met. I am the legendary Orochimaru."

"I am Namikaze Kushina." She said tightly.

Orochimaru laughed. "Minato's wife? Well I can see why he fell in love with you."

"Shut up." Kushina ground out.

Tsunade focused chakra into her fist. "Orochimaru! Why did you do this?"

He laughed and shut his eyes. "Because I wanted revenge on all those who betrayed me."

"Betrayed you?!" Sarutobi shouted. "You were murdering and experimenting on your own fellow villagers!"

"Yesss," he opened his eyes to reveal the sharingan. "And see what it has gained me."

"You have the sharingan?" Tsunade exclaimed.

"That's right. With my genius and through experimentation I have found the key to immortal life. I can take possession of the bodies of others and gain their abilities. I will never grow old and I will never die. I will learn every single jutsu that exists and be the greatest genius this world has ever known. I will live forever."

"How can you live forever when you're going to die right here and now?" Tsunade rushed at him. Kakashi formed a lightning blade and charged in as did Kushina. Sarutobi hung back.

Laughing he avoided her punches with ease, his body able to bend and twist with unnatural ease and grace. He struck her viciously in the stomach and then knocked her down. With a single hand he caught Kakashi by the wrist and held him there, before throwing him off the roof.

Kushina performed the Dance of the Rose and aimed for the bastard's head. He dodged and moved avoiding her blade with ease. He snapped a punch that caught her square in the face and sent her flying.

He laughed. "I have adapted this body to give it great speed, strength, and agility. With the sharingan to read your movements you have no hope against me." He opened up his mouth and pulled out a sword. "I will enjoy this."

Sarutobi completed a last hand sign. " **Dome of Fate Technique** ." A large dome formed around the two of them leaving Tsunade and a recently returned Kakashi looking in at them.

Orochimaru experimentally pressed against the dome and found it quite solid. He turned to Sarutobi with a grin. "What are you up to old man?"

Sarutobi spoke grimly as he worked through hand signs. "The dome will not hold long but it will be enough. You are my responsibility and my shame Orochimaru. I will not allow you to cause any more deaths." He completed the last hand sign. " **Shiki Fujin**." (Reaper Death Seal) "I could have ended your evil long ago but in my moment of weakness I failed. All the evil you have done since that day falls upon me. Now I shall atone for my failure by ending all of your ambitions."

Orochimaru could feel the air grow colder around him and his sharingan showed him *something* standing behind his old teacher. "Old fool! No one can end my ambitions! What sort of jutsu is this?"

Sarutobi hesitated for just a moment until he could feel the shinigami reach into him and the seal form on his belly. He smiled sadly at Orochimaru, who had once been his pride and joy. "This is the jutsu that defeated the Kyuubi. It put an end to the nine tails destruction and it will end yours as well."

"Fool! I don't know what you think is going to happen here but I'm not the one who is going to die!" He rushed at him with his sword. He dove with the sword straight out ready to adjust depending on how Sarutobi dodged. To his own surprise though Sarutobi never moved and he was able to put his sword into his chest. But even as he did so he felt his body turn to ice. He felt his superb and powerful body grow suddenly weak. "Why... why didn't you dodge?"

Sarutobi coughed up some blood. "To work this seal the caster must give up his own life. I didn't bother to dodge because there's no point. I am going to die anyway."

"What have you... done to me?" He gasped. "What is this weakness?"

Sarutobi coughed up some more blood. "What you feel is your soul being pulled from your body. Make your final peace if you can my foolish student. For rest assured you are dying this day."

"Never." He gritted his teeth and tried to drive the sword even further into Sarutobi's chest.

---

"What the hell?" Ibiki whispered.

---

"What the hell?" Baki gasped.

All through the street in front of him 500 clones had appeared. They had slit red eyes and fangs but far more troubling they had swords drawn. Two of the clones immediately grabbed hold of the original Naruto and pulled him out of the danger zone. Twenty clones stayed with the original to guard him. The others shouted and rushed forward performing the dance of the cherry blossoms, the Dance of the Sakura.

"They're just shadow clones we can deal with them easily!" Baki leapt backwards to gain some room and tossed some kunai. His statement was both right and wrong. These were shadow clones, but they would not be easy to deal with.

What neither Baki nor Naruto nor anyone else knew was that by creating them with the Kyuubi's chakra they had one tiny but oh so important difference. In the future Naruto would call these his red chakra clones and they would be a special weapon because of their difference.

A sand nin swiftly threw three shurikens at three clones that were closing on him. All three struck home. But the clones kept right on coming. The ninja died screaming as three swords stabbed into him.

Baki also struck three clones with kunai only to see them keep coming. Temari leapt beside him and swung her fan " **Great Wind Dance.**" The winds caught the clones and sent them spiraling away. But there were more coming. Temari thought about calling her summon but the clones were in among her own people she would have to slaughter them too to use it. "What's going on? Shouldn't they be dispelled when they're hit?"

Baki nodded. "According to what I know about shadow clones." As he watched the three clones he'd hit landed roughly but got back up, all still with kunai in their chests. As they began coming back at him they finally dispelled in puffs of smoke.

"That's it!" Baki turned to his student. "These shadow clones can still be dispelled but they have a delay of perhaps thirty seconds." He and Temari both paled at that. What that tiny little delay meant was that even if they were hit multiple times they would keep coming for another 30 seconds which was plenty of time for them to reach you with those swords. As Baki watched he saw his men being cut down by clones riddled with shuriken and kunai. These clones would be too much for them.

"We're done." Baki said to himself.

"What was that sensei?" Temari asked as she launched another wind attack to keep some more of the clones at bay.

He turned to her. "I said we were done. I'm calling a retreat."

"Baki you can't! The Kazekage will have your head for that!" Temari said.

"Temari the Kazekage is dead, along with most of our forces."

"You can't be sure of that! He might..."

"He is dead Temari. If he were alive he would be right here trying to rally his forces. He is gone and it looks like I am senior on the field

now." He took a deep breath. "Retreat! Fall Back! Retreat!"

Temari was stunned but she did her part using her wind jutsus to try and cover others as they pulled back.

---

Ibiki shouted. "Naruto! Stop! Let them go!"

Naruto had been going after the retreating sand nins. Most of the clones stopped momentarily but stared at Ibiki.

"Are you crazy?" Several said at once. "Why should I let them get away?"

"They've fled the battlefield and are no longer a threat." Ibiki pointed eastward. "But we're still needed there. Let them go for now. We can always deal with them another day if we have to. But the village needs us over there to deal with Orochimaru's forces. That is our priority."

The Narutos frowned and one spoke up expressing what they were all thinking. "I really don't want to let them get away, but I guess you're right." With that they began moving to the east end of the village.

---

"Old man what the hell are you doing?!" Tsunade smashed her chakra enhanced fist into the dome to no effect. "Drop the jutsu and let us help you!"

"There's something going on in there." Kakashi said. He had his sharingan exposed.

"I know!" Tsunade shouted in frustration. "That bastard has a sword through his chest!"

"No," Kakashi said. "There is some sort of sealing going on but I can't tell exactly what."



"Maybe this is some sort of plan on Sarutobi's part." Kushina offered.

"What sort of plan includes letting your enemy stab you through the chest?!" She began to pound on the dome with renewed vigor.  
"Sarutobi!"

---

Orochimaru struggled to hold on to his life force. "Tsunade wants to help you old man." He gasped. "Why don't you drop the jutsu and let her?"

Sarutobi coughed up some more blood. "It would make no difference and I will not put the Hokage in danger needlessly." He smiled weakly. "It seems I am at the end of my strength."

"In that case will you please die and let me get on with destroying this wretched village?"

"No Orochimaru. Though it seems I am not strong enough to pull your soul completely from your body I can still put an end to your ambitions."

Suddenly what had been a fuzzy image cleared and Orochimaru could see a terrifying figure standing behind Sarutobi wielding a blade. "What is that?!" Orochimaru called out in fear.

"What you see is the shinigami that I summoned here. Now you will face your punishment." As Sarutobi spoke the arm holding the blade fell.

"No!!" Orochimaru howled. The blade cut into his life force and the part representing his arms was drawn into Sarutobi's belly.

"Seal!" With that the jutsu was completed and the shinigami began to devour the old man's soul.

"My arms!" Both his arms fell limp to his side. With horror he watched the skin turn black. "What have you done?!"

Sarutobi smiled victoriously. He was at peace; at long last he had atoned for his terrible mistake so long ago. "I have ended your ambitions Orochimaru your hands and arms are now useless to you. You can no longer make hand signs and so can no longer work ninjutsu. Your plan to destroy the leaf village has failed!" Orochimaru could only glower at him. Sarutobi felt the last of his life slipping away. "I regret only that I could not take you with me, but let us meet again one day in the afterlife."

Those were the last words of the man who had been the Third Hokage of Konohgakure. And as he fell over Orochimaru stared hatefully at his peaceful expression.

"Damn you old man." Orochimaru cursed.

With Sarutobi's death the dome was immediately released. Tsunade and the others rushed in. "Get away from him!" Tsunade screamed.

"Gladly!" he leapt away. "You're welcome to his rotting corpse you old witch!" Orochimaru fled.

"Sensei!" Tsunade knelt down beside him and tried desperately to do the impossible.

---

Sarutobi was dead. Tsunade could do nothing but weep. Kushina and Kakashi stayed with her and tried to console as best they could. All around them the battle still raged. Orochimaru had fled but did not bother to call a general retreat. He wanted as much of Konoha to burn as possible. Determined Leaf nins were trying to dig them out and slowly pushing them back. To aid them reinforcements arrived led by Asuma and Ibiki. Asuma's force of 200 had actually arrived on the scene just as Ibiki was heading to the other battle sight. Along with the forces they led were over three hundred shadow clones still eager to fight. Kushina spotted some of them and ran to the roof's edge.

"Naruto!"

One of the clones heard her and detoured to the roof. Seeing his appearance both Kushina and Tsunade were taken aback. Naruto was a little disappointed by the reaction but understood. "Mom, godmother it's o.k. when I use the red chakra it changes how I look."

Kushina got over it and held out her arms. Naruto gladly ran to her and hugged her. "Naruto-kun *why* did you disobey the Hokage and go out all alone without anyone to watch your back?" Kushina asked as she held her son.

"Well mom I didn't think I was breaking her orders. I made a bunch of shadow clones to help my team keep the students safe. I just decided that with my red chakra I could be a bigger help fighting."

Tsunade got up and looked at him unhappily. "That was not your decision to make Naruto! I expect my ninjas to carry out my orders, especially during an emergency. And don't give me any nonsense about shadow clones. We both know you should have stayed with your team!"

"But godmother *I'm* a shadow clone."

"I know that, but since the real Naruto isn't here for me to yell at you'll do. Besides he'll get the memory when you dispel." Tsunade said.

"Where is the real Naruto?" Kushina asked.

"He's all right mom!" Naruto assured. "He's suffering from chakra exhaustion so twenty clones brought him back to the house. They'll guard him."

Tsunade frowned to hear that. "You see you ended up unconscious! You should have obeyed my orders!"

"Actually I am very glad he did not." Ibiki landed on the roof.

"Ibiki what are you doing here? Who is fighting the sand ninjas?"

"Hokage-sama the sand ninjas have been routed, entirely thanks to Naruto. He single-handedly not only drove them back but killed most of them. If he had not been there we would still be trying to hold them back instead of being here to reinforce."

Tsunade, Kushina, and Kakashi were all looking at him. "You single single-handedly broke an invading army?" Kakashi asked.

"That sounds like the sort of thing your father did during the third great ninja war." Kushina said seriously.

Tsunade let out a sigh. "Well Naruto, if you really did shut down one of the fronts by yourself then I suppose I can't get upset with you, especially since the academy students were kept safe."

Naruto looked to Kushina. "You're not mad either are you mom?"

Kushina smiled. "No son, I'm very proud of you!"

Naruto let out a sigh of relief. "Good so you're not really going to ground me for a month." Kakashi groaned. Kushina and Tsunade suddenly darkened their expressions. "Uhm, did I say something wrong?"

"You were listening!" Tsunade declared. "I *ordered* you to report in and you deliberately chose not to!"

"I asked you to answer and you didn't! Do you have any idea how worried I was about you?!" Kushina said.

Kakashi just shook his head silently. *You need to work on being a little more deceptive Naruto.*

---

The enemy Sound ninjas were quickly routed when Naruto's red chakra clones arrived. The sight of Naruto coming at them even with kunai sticking out of his chest began to sap their will. Eventually the surviving sound ninjas fled just as the sand nins had done. And as

they fled they talked to each other about a certain red eyed, sword wielding, demonic looking ninja. They didn't know his name so they called him the red eyed demon, the leaf demon, or the killing demon. Among the citizens and ninja of Konoha stories also spread quickly about the one who had killed hundreds of sand ninjas with a single jutsu. Stories were spread about the ninja whose incredible power had turned the tide. They knew who he was of course, and where his awesome power came from. Some still feared him but most saw him as a hero; like his father. But even those who saw him as a hero began to call him by a new name. Before long he would be best known by this name by both friend and foe. Just as Namikaze Minato became the Yellow Flash of Konoha. Namikaze Naruto would also become the Demon of Konoha.

## From the ashes

**Author's Note:** First let me just thank everyone for the amazing response to this story. It is really great to know so many people enjoy it. Now I just need to make an announcement. As most of you have probably noticed I have been updating a chapter a day since releasing this story; thirty five chapters in thirty five days. More than a few of you have asked if I had all this prewritten or was actually writing a chapter a day. Well scary as this may sound I have been writing every day and usually stayed about two chapters ahead. At first I was chained to my computer because I had a ton of great ideas for the very beginning of the story. Then seeing the awesome response I was getting I decided to try and see if I could keep writing and uploading a chapter a day. I sort of saw it as a cool little personal challenge of my writing skills, fortitude, and lack of need for sleep. And of course the more compliments I got on the speed of my updates the more determined I was to keep going.

Now there are two things I really dislike from people who write and post stories here. One, I dislike it when people use polls to decide plot, or couples, or whatever else. I happen to think that if you're going to the trouble of writing something and posting it then it should be because you want people to read *your* story. Honestly, if you don't even have a strong enough sense of the plot to be able decide if it should be Hinata, Sakura, or Ino who is the girlfriend why even bother to write? Tell *your* story the way *you* like it best. Otherwise what's the point?

Second I hate people who start a decent story and then just let it die unfinished. There is nothing more annoying than reading a good story getting into it and then realizing it hasn't been updated in a year and a half. I believe in finishing the things I start. I currently have three other stories I am working on. They sort of got put on the back burner when I saw the monstrous response this story received. I want to go back and work on those now and see about finishing them.

Now there's no need to worry as I am **not** putting this on hiatus. I am **not** planning to forget about updating it. However I will **not** be updating daily anymore. Spring semester at college is about to begin. With school and trying to work on other stories weekly updates will be the goal. Sorry if I've spoiled you. But I do promise to keep working on this story. And I never break my word. For that is my author's way.

---

He opened his eyes beneath a glorious blue sky. He sat up in a grass field full of flowers and felt no pain. And there not too faraway was what looked like an old ruined fortress. He stood and felt no pain at all. He sighed and began to jog towards the gate that he knew was there.

He stood before the closed gate with the single seal upon it. "Well I'm here." He called out.

Two gigantic red eyes and a long row of teeth appeared behind the iron gate. **KNEEL BEFORE ME!**

"No."

**YOU DARE?**

"Unlike last time I'm not a scared kid with no idea who you are."

**WHO DO YOU THINK I AM MORTAL WORM?**

"You're the nine tail fox that my father defeated." The Kyuubi roared in fury. "Howl all you want you bastard fox! The fact remains!"

**SHOW ME RESPECT OR I WILL MAKE YOU REGRET IT!**

"No," Naruto repeated. " *You're* the prisoner and *I'm* the jailer. I'll show you no respect. You took away my father and because of you a lot of people hate me. You've already done me all the harm you can."

He saw the teeth form a fox grin. **IF YOU BELIEVE THAT YOU ARE A FOOL.**

"Oh really?" He deliberately stood within arm's length of the gate. He spread his arms out to either side exposing himself to attack. "Then why don't you punish me right here and now?" The Kyuubi's roar made his ears hurt, but he smiled nonetheless. "Just as I thought. I've read up on seals over the last four years and talked to granddad about it. You can't control me or cause me any direct harm, not unless I allow it."

The red eyes flattened a bit, and though he couldn't see it Naruto had a mental image of fox ears being pinned back. **I CAN DENY YOU MY CHAKRA.**

Naruto shrugged. "Yes you can, but if you do that it becomes more likely that I die sooner rather than later. Is that what you want? Afterall, when I die you die."

The fox growled. **I AM THE KYUUBI NO KITSUNE! I WILL NEVER DIE!**

"Oh yes you will!" Naruto declared. "When my time finally comes I'll take you into death with me. It will be the final service I perform for my village!" The Kyuubi growled at him and Naruto let out a sigh. "But I'm not looking to hurry that day along. Instead of threatening me why don't you help me?"

The demon eyed him for a time. Then chuckled. **LET ME GUESS. YOU WANT MORE POWER?**

Naruto frowned; he didn't like to think the Kyuubi could read him so easy. "Yes I do."

The Kyuubi laughed. **TEAR AWAY MY SEAL AND I WILL GIVE YOU MORE POWER THAN YOU EVER DREAMED OF.**



"No thanks." Naruto eyed him. "How about instead you give me just a little more and let me use it without feeling like I'm about to die."

The Kyuubi eyed him once more. **I'LL GIVE YOU A LITTLE MORE POWER. AS FOR THE PAIN YOU FEEL THERE IS NO AVOIDING THAT. YOUR HUMAN BODY IS SIMPLY TOO FRAIL TO STAND THE STRAIN FOR LONG. AS YOU GROW OLDER AND USE THE POWER MORE OFTEN YOU WILL BUILD GREATER ENDURANCE AND BE ABLE TO HOLD THE POWER LONGER. BUT YOU WILL ALWAYS HAVE A LIMIT.**

"Isn't there anything I can do about that?"

**YOU CAN TEAR OFF MY SEAL.**

"No."

**THEN ACCEPT YOUR LIMITS MORTAL. NOW LEAVE ME.**

"Wait! I need to ask..." but everything around him faded away.

---

He opened his eyes and saw he was in his own bed. "Damn rude baka fox." Naruto muttered.

"Naruto-kun you're awake!" A happy voice called. Hinata jumped into the bed and immediately began to hug him and kiss him.

She caught him by surprise. *Whoa! Hard to believe Hinata-chan used to be so shy!* But he soon had his arms around her and was eagerly returning her kisses.

"Naruto-kun," she pulled back a bit to catch her breath. "Why did you leave me?"

"I wanted to keep you safe." He leaned forward to kiss her but she pulled out of his arms to sit back on the edge of his bed. "What's wrong?"

"You're a baka." She said.

"What?" *No way! Did my sweet little Hinata-chan just call me a...*

"Baka!" she yelled at him. "Baka! Baka! Baka! I called you a baka Naruto-kun!"

"Why are you calling me that?" Upset he sat up in the bed. He was a bit embarrassed to see his mom had put him in his bunny pajamas.

"Because you are one! You don't need to protect me Naruto-kun! I'm a strong kunoichi and I'm ready to face any danger to stand by your side."

"But I don't want you to face danger Hinata-chan! When I think of you getting hurt or worse I die inside! I couldn't bear to see you hurt."

She relented a bit and leaned forward against him and let his arms wrap lovingly around her. "I know Naruto-kun, that's how I feel when I think about you in danger. But as long as we're shinobi there's no avoiding the danger. And I want to face it with you so I can at least be there when you need me." She gave him a firm look. "I am kunoichi of the leaf; you don't need to shelter me. Instead fight with me and watch my back and I will always do the same for you Naruto-kun. Now promise me you won't ever try and shield me from danger again."

"I can't promise you that Hinata-chan."

She pulled out of his arms again. "Fine, then no more kisses or hugs until you do."

He gawked at her. "You wouldn't!"

She crossed her arms. "I don't want to but I would."

He frowned at her. "You told me once that all your kisses were for me."

"They *are* all for you. I'm not going to start kissing anyone else. But until I get your promise I just won't kiss anyone."

He sighed. He knew he could live without her kisses and hugs. But who would want to? "All right Hinata-chan I promise to never try and shelter you from danger."

She gave him a happy smile. "Good!" She was back in his arms and kissing again. "Oh Naruto-kun the Hokage asked you to come see her once you felt all right. She checked on you last night to make sure it was just chakra exhaustion. Why don't you get dressed and we'll both go to the tower."

"Sure, oh, uhm I'll probably need to check with kaasan first."

"Why?"

He looked a bit embarrassed. "Well, she sort of told one of my clones I was grounded for two months. I'm not allowed out of the estates except for missions and team training. So I need to check... hey are you laughing at me?"

Hinata had both hands over her mouth trying to suppress her giggles. "No."

"You are your laughing at me!" He began to pout and Hinata couldn't help it, she burst out laughing.

---

Kushina actually decided to accompany both of them to the tower. As the three of them walked they noticed something. The fact that the crowds parted to give them space was not unusual. The sight of people bowing or cheering was also not strange; a few had always done that. What was surprising was that *most* of the people on the street were showing him this respect. Rather than the one in ten he was used to nine in ten bowed or cheered him. As they walked he heard again and again people call blessings on him.

"Is this a dream?' Naruto asked. "Am I in a hospital bed in a coma or something?"

"It's no dream Naruto-kun." Hinata said and gave his hand a squeeze. "They all know what you did yesterday and they finally see you as a hero."

Kushina put a hand on his shoulder and gave him a proud smile. "This is how it should have *always* been."

And as they walked he also heard a few people call him, 'demon.' Naruto frowned and sighed. "Well I guess not everyone sees me as a hero." He wasn't really disappointed though. This was still a lot better than it had been.

Kushina looked thoughtful. She noted that the people who were calling him that were still bowing or cheering. And the tone was not hostile at all. "Actually Naruto-kun I don't think they're using it as an insult. I think it's your new nickname."

"Huh?"

Kushina smiled. "Think of it as a family curse we all get nicknames; Yellow Flash, Red Death, and Demon."

Naruto frowned. "I don't think I like it."

Kushina shrugged. "Well Naruto-kun I've never really liked mine, but I've learned that once a name takes it's impossible to get rid of. Try and do what I have and make your new name one people respect and maybe fear."

He thought about that and slowly nodded. "The demon, or maybe the demon of the leaf village. It does have a powerful ring to it." He smiled. "I kind of liked, 'demon of the mist,' I think, 'demon of the leaf' might be pretty good." He had a small smile. "It should look really cool in all the Bingo books!"

---

Tsunade welcome the three of them into her office. "How are you feeling Naruto?"

"I feel just fine." Naruto said.

Tsunade nodded. "Well that's good to hear. It's a refreshing change to hear some good news this morning. We lost a lot of people yesterday. We still only have estimates but our losses include about 600 shinobi and perhaps ten thousand civilians, not to mention that about a quarter of the village was destroyed in the fighting." She let out a deep sigh. "We will hold a memorial tomorrow to honor our dead. But there is too much to be done for us to waste any time. One thing we have to do is start to replace all the Jonin and Chunin that have been lost. So I've decided to promote Hinata, Kiba, Skikamaru, Ino, Lee, and Tenten to Chunin rank." Reaching behind her desk she produced a green vest and handed it to Hinata. "Congratulations Hinata!"

"Thank you Hokage-sama! I promise to work very hard to be worthy of my new rank!" Hinata said proudly.

Naruto was staring up at her with an open mouth. Tsunade smiled sweetly at him in feigned ignorance. "Is something wrong Naruto?"

"What about me? You promoted everyone else who made the finals, even *Shikamaru* and *Ino*! How can you leave me out?"

She gave him a frosty look. "Oh? And do you think someone who *deliberately* goes against orders deserves to be Chunin?"

"But I was doing it to help the village! And I stopped the Sand nins! Ibiki even said so!"

Tsunade crossed her arms over her chest. "Every ninja who fought yesterday or performed some other assignment was trying to help the village. And *they* didn't have to break orders."

"But are you really going to punish me for wanting to do more?"  
Naruto pleaded.

Tsunade lifts an eyebrow. "And you consider being made Jonin a punishment?"

"Of course I do! It's not fair that... huh?"

Tsunade and Kushina both began to laugh while Hinata and Naruto both looked confused. Tsunade smiled and rubbed the top of his head messing up his hair. "I'm sorry Naruto you have to let me get a little bit of fun where I can." From behind her desk she produced another vest. "Naruto we have reports that the Kazekage was killed. Most likely by you along with between two and three hundred sand ninjas. And your shadow clones helped bring the battle to its conclusion. You are clearly one of, if not the, most powerful ninja in this village and I am most pleased to promote you to the rank of Jonin."

"Naruto-kun! I am so happy for you!" Hinata hugged him.

"Thanks Hinata-chan and I am really happy for you. You deserve it!"  
Naruto turned back to Tsunade. "Thank you godmother!"

She smiled at him. Then slowly shook her head and lost some of her good cheer. "You're welcome Naruto. But you should know being Jonin only means your life will get that much harder and more dangerous. When word about yesterday's battle gets out it will become clear to everyone that you are a jinchuriki and possess the Kyuubi, given the level of power you displayed there's no way to keep it secret."

Naruto nodded solemnly. "I kind of figured that."

"Is that why you told everyone at the academy Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked.

"Yes Hinata-chan. I knew too many people were going to see me with the red chakra. I knew it would be impossible to keep it secret any longer."

"Well now that the secret is out you are going to draw a lot of attention. I expect you to be listed in every Bingo book by the end of the month."

"Really?" He said excitedly.

Tsunade frowned at his enthusiasm. "Naruto that is *not* a good thing! For a ninja surprise is a weapon that you will no longer have."

Naruto grinned, and despite his normal features there was something just a bit animalistic in it. "It's all right Hokage-sama I have enough weapons."

---

Tsunade was busy that morning.

"Neji thank you for coming to see me."

He bowed to her. "I am happy to be of service Hokage-sama. And just how can I be of service?"

Tsunade looked at him with complete seriousness. "We have lost a lot of people Neji. The village needs every person in it to pull together and help in order for us to get through this difficult time. There is a way you could be of very great value to Konoha."

"How Hokage-sama?"

She smiled. "How would you like to be a medic nin?"

He looked at her in complete surprise. "I must admit the thought had never occurred to me. The lady Hinata has a great interest in healing, but mine has always been in fighting."

"Just think about it for a moment Neji. Your wounds have not affected your ability to draw or use chakra and like most members of your clan you have excellent chakra control. You would make an outstanding medical nin."

"I suppose that is true." He answered carefully. "However my lack of mobility and physical stamina would still seem to limit my usefulness in the field."

Tsunade nodded. "I am glad you understand that. That is why you would not be assigned to a team rather you would be working in Konoha hospital. You would not have missions but you would be a true ninja and I would also promote you to Chunin once you had progressed far enough. I am about to start teaching a new class and I would like you to be among my students. You could be of very great help in saving the lives of our wounded. What do you think?"

He thought about it. Being a medic nin had never once crossed his mind. His pride came from proving himself in combat. However, that dream was gone now. He no longer had the mobility or stamina to go on missions. But if he were medic nin he *would* still be a ninja, he would even have a purpose. He would be a healer instead of a fighter. He wondered if that meant Hinata would suddenly want to become a fighter rather than a healer. He tried to imagine her deliberately instigating fights with Lee. He chuckled.

"Something funny?" Tsunade asked.

"No Hokage-sama, if you believe I can best serve the leaf village by becoming a medic nin then I shall do so."

"Wonderful."

---

"Thank you for seeing me Hokage-sama."

Tsunade smiled and tried to appear gracious. Whether she liked the man or not he needed to be treated with respect. "I always have time



for the heads or our clans. How can I help you Riyuki?"

"You are I trust aware of the recent change in my daughter's status?"

"If you mean her recent acquiring of the sharingan, yes I am aware of it."

He smiled. "Obviously things have now changed. She is now of *great* concern to my clan and to myself. We would like her to be placed on a new team."

Tsunade frowned. This was about what she had expected. "On what grounds? It is unusual for a ninja to be removed from her team. It is extremely rare without the request of her sensei. And I must tell you her sensei was here earlier today and told me quite specifically that she was happy with your daughter's performance."

He frowned. "Of that I have no doubt. However what her current sensei wants is beside the point."

"Then what is the point?"

"My clan and I wish her to be on a different team where she may have a more beneficial role."

Tsunade shook her head. "She fought very well with her current team during yesterday's battle. I would say the role she is serving now is beneficial to the village."

"She would do better with a different sensei and a different team." Riyuki put just a little bit of heat in his words.

"Perhaps," she was willing to allow. "But that alone is not enough reason to transfer her." She pushed on before Riyuki could object. "Most especially as you declared you were disinterested in her only a month ago."

"The situation has changed."

"Obviously, but you did not put in a disclaimer at the time. You washed your hands of her without condition. She is serving well where she is and I see no valid reason to move her yet again. She will stay with her current team."

"I see." He bowed to her and quietly left.

She sighed. "What a pleasant fellow." She muttered.

---

The next meeting was a relief as this person had an open and friendly demeanor and was just plain likable. "Thank you for coming today."

He smiled at her. "Of course, I would never think to refuse a meeting with the Hokage."

She nodded. "I'll come right to the point. You have some excellent untapped potential and a number of recommendations, including your father's of course. I am about to start teaching a new class and I want you to be in it. How would you like to become a true medic nin?"

The boy gave her a deep heartfelt smile. "Hokage-sama thank you! It has always been my dream to learn at the hands of the legendary Sannin Lady Tsunade. I eagerly accept."

"Good! I'm glad this was so easy. Now, I'd like to ask you what you did during the battle."

He looked a bit embarrassed and pushed his glasses back up. "I am ashamed to admit this but I was at the stadium and fell asleep when the genjutsu took effect. I woke to a scene of slaughter with the battle already over." Kabuto confessed shamefully.

Tsunade nodded in sympathy. "Don't feel bad the same happened to many of our Genin. I am sure I can expect great things from you in the future."

He bowed deeply to her. "Hokage-sama I truly hope to astound you." Kabuto said.

---

The next day the bells tolled. All of Konoha turned out to honor all those who had died to preserve the leaf village. Sarutobi, Shikaku, Inoichi, Choza, and so many others who had made the ultimate sacrifice. The entire village turned out in their mourning clothes to honor them. One by one they laid down a white flower before the images of their fallen comrades. Naruto and his mother comforted Tsunade for the loss of someone who had been like a second father to her. Naruto went to his former classmates to offer what comfort he could. Ino hugged him and for once he did not object and returned her hug and shared with her words of comfort. Of the three of them Ino seemed the most deeply hurt. Her father would never call her princess again. Chouji was deeply saddened and did not want to talk. Shikamaru wept as he looked at the smiling image of his father.

A light rain began to fall and Shika rubbed his eyes. "Damn rain, it gets in my eyes."

"I know it does." Naruto said quietly.

Shikamaru looked at his friend. "You never knew your father, so I guess I should be glad I got so much time with mine."

Naruto nodded. "All I ever had were stories. You should be glad you got to know him. Being ninja there are no guarantees."

"You know it's funny," Shikamaru said softly. "He would always tell these stories about how he and his team would get in these unbelievable situations and how somehow they would always survive them." Shikamaru laughed a bit. "Dad would always tell me he didn't like to gamble because he wanted to save his luck for the battlefield. He always told those stories and you know after awhile I stopped listening to them. They got boring. I mean they were all the same; they'd get in trouble and somehow they would find a way out of it. I always thought that was how it would be for them. I never ever

thought..." He didn't say any thing else for awhile. Naruto just remained there at his side patient. "Is that how it was for you with your mom?"

Naruto shook his head. "No, I was the opposite. Every time my mom left I was terrified I would never see her again. I remember all my nightmares when I was little were about her being hurt or going away and never coming back."

Shikamaru was quiet for awhile. "I'm going to miss him a lot."

"I know."

Shikamaru paused for a bit. "I need to go and take care of my mom." He hesitated. "Naruto, can I ask you something about the battle?"

"Sure, what?"

"You did most of your fighting against the sand ninjas right?"

"That's right."

"By any chance do you remember seeing a blonde kunoichi with four pony tails and a giant fan?"

Naruto looked at his friend oddly. The question wasn't one he'd expected. "You mean the girl who kicked Sasuke's ass in the preliminaries?" Shikamaru nodded nervously. "Yeah I remember her."

Shikamaru swallowed, afraid to ask. "Did you... kill her?" To his immense relief Naruto shook his head.

"Nope, she kept blasting my clones with wind jutsus out of her damn fan I never got close to her." He looked at his friend. "Why do you care?"

"No reason, I'll see you later Naruto."

---

Walking home with his mother he suddenly stopped and hugged her with all his might.

Kushina was taken by surprise. "Is something wrong son?"

He shook his head. "I love you mom." He choked the words out.

She put her arms around her baby and hugged him back. "I love you too Naruto-kun, I love you too." After a bit he let go and wiped his eyes.

"Rain get in my eyes." He complained.

Kushina nodded. "It gets in mine too." She put an arm around his shoulders. "Come on, let's go home and I'll make you some ramen."

## Terms of surrender

It had only been seven days. Seven days since the battle of Konoha. Seven days ago the forces of Suna had made her one of the five great shinobi villages. Seven days ago the Kazekage had led a superb army consisting of 500 elite Suna ninja and their secret weapon; Gaara. They had gone into battle with the strongest of the five villages with the hope of defeating them and securing Suna's future. Even with allies, even with Gaara's power, and even with surprise they had all understood that war with Konoha was a risk. But the Kazekage had judged it a risk with taking. Five hundred ninja had gone north with their Kazekage and with Gaara. Thirty nine had returned, the Kazekage and Gaara not among them.

Perhaps the best possible evidence of their situation was to be seen in the meeting of the Council of Wind. There had been fifteen members, now three remained. The leader of the Council was an old man named Sulamon. He was both respected and feared as the head of the Department of Internal Security as well as the Kazekage's Chief Advisor. He had been the Kazekage's strongest supporter and had been left in charge of the village. Sulamon was also the clan head of Ossama, one of the six founding clans of Suna. He was a strong man who was used to making hard decisions. Now he found himself responsible for his village's survival.

"What are we supposed to do?" Polido asked desperately.

"We have to fight! What else can we do?" Suguya said with conviction.

"Fight with what?" Sulamon said calmly. Both of them turned to him. "We no longer have an army. Including the three of us Suna has a total of seven Jonins and twenty Chunins all the rest are Genin. How are we supposed to fight with any hope of victory or even survival?"

Suguya clenched his fists. "We still have ninja! We can make a stand at the valley entrance and hold them there."

"And when their jinchuuriki casts his S-rank wind jutsu against us? What will happen then?" Sulamon lit a pipe and began to smoke peacefully. He gave them both a minute but neither of them wanted to answer so he answered his own question. "Our troops will be annihilated. After which the army of Konoha will enter Suna and take their revenge on us."

There was complete silence in the Council room as Sulamon puffed on his pipe.

"How could we not have known they had a biju at their disposal?" Polido asked.

Sulamon frowned at him. The Department of Internal Security ran Suna's intelligence networks. "Is that a condemnation of my department?" Sulamon asked quietly.

"No! Not at all!" Polido fell over himself apologizing.

Sulamon continued to puff on his pipe. "All indications are they did not suspect the existence of Gaara as our secret weapon. We in turn did not suspect this Naruto to be their's." Sulamon let out a stream of smoke. "It seems we were equally good at keeping important secrets. Unfortunately their jinchuuriki proved the stronger weapon.

"Then what are we to do now?" Polido asked.

"We have no choice we must accept the surrender terms."

Suguya slammed both fists on the table. "Never! To accept these terms would be to disgrace ourselves and our descendants."

"To refuse them would be to destroy ourselves and our descendants. Suguya I understand your anger, but to resist, while brave, would be

suicidal. It is our duty to save and protect Suna not deliberately cause its demise."

Saguya took a deep breath. "Is there no other way?"

"None," Sulamon shook his head. "Let us make this official. As head of the Council I call the question. Shall we accept the terms of surrender sent to us by the Hokage of the Leaf village? Let all those who agree to do so raise a hand." Sulamon, Polido, and finally Saguya raised a hand. "It is done." Sulamon announced it as though it were a sentence of death, and in a way it was. "We will meet with the new clan heads this afternoon and share the terms with them before we announce it to the village."

"There will be rioting when they hear of it." Polido said morosely.

"I do not think so." Sulamon stood up from the table. "Take a look at something with me." He walked over to a glass door and stepped out onto a small balcony. Polido and Saguya joined him. Down in the village they could see a dozen or more fires lit. They were burning at various cross streets and a crowd was gathered around each.

"What are they doing? Have they started to riot already?" Polido asked.

"No," Saguya said sadly. He like Sulamon and unlike the younger Polido was a veteran of the third great ninja war. "Those are bonfires. The crowds are throwing their most precious possessions into them."

"But why?" Polido wondered.

Saguya quietly explained. "They are making offerings to Kami. Near the end of the last war, when we stood bankrupt and exhausted the people did the very same thing. It is a sign that they realize how dire the situation is. They are giving up their most valued treasures in the hope that Kami will spare them and the village. It means the people will not riot, they will accept the surrender."



"It is a funeral pyre." Sulamon spoke with a melancholy certainty. "This marks the end of Suna as a great power. We will never again rise to what we were." He took a deep breath and set himself to walk a hard road. "But we will save what we can."

---

"Are you sure you want me to do this Temari?" Her maid Tanya asked.

"Yes." Temari answered in a dead voice. "I can't do much but I can at least mourn them properly. Maybe Kankuro and Gaara will know somehow and be just a little comforted to know I miss them."

"And your father as well?"

"No," Temari said with just a little heat. " *He can rot in hell unmourned and forgotten. You never called me daughter. You never let me call you father. Even though we lived in the same house you were a stranger to me and I do not miss you.*

Tanya gulped. "As you wish." She began cutting Temari's beautiful locks. "Will you wear it short for the full year?"

"Of course." Temari always tried to carry out the traditions. She thought it showed respect for all those who had come before. She sat there quietly in her bedroom and looked into the mirror as Tanya cut off her hair. "He was a sad little boy." She said quietly.

Tanya stopped cutting and looked at her questioningly. "Who?"

"Gaara. I remember when he was very little, before he became so cold. He was very sad. All he wanted was love, for someone to care about him." She looked down in shame. "I never gave him that. At first it was because I resented him for taking mother away. I blamed him for that. Then later on I was scared of him like everyone else. The only person who ever showed him any affection was my uncle Yashamaru. After he died was when Gaara started to withdraw and

become cold and uncaring." She was quiet for a bit. "I was relieved." She whispered.

Tanya hadn't really heard. "What was that?"

Temari kept looking down. "When Baki told me Gaara was dead, the very first thing I felt was relief. I was relieved to know my baby brother was dead."

"Temari-san! Who could blame you for that? I heard him threaten to kill you and Kankuro more than once. And I know you were afraid of him as we all were. Even if you were his sister no one could blame you for feeling that!"

Temari nodded but said nothing. No, no one would blame her. There was not a single person in the whole village who would not feel relief knowing Gaara was gone. And that was the tragedy of Gaara's lonely existence. That not one person who had known him would truly regret that he was gone. Not even his own sister. Temari sat there in silence as Tanya finished cutting her hair short. When Tanya was done her mistress waved a simple dismissal and she was left alone in her bedroom. Now that she was alone she let the tears spill out. She knew the twenty fifth rule of shinobi conduct and she would never cry in front of others. But now alone she gave into her grief. She cried for Gaara and Kankuro and for all the chances that were now gone forever.

---

The four of them were having dinner in a small restaurant in some little Fire country village.

Sasuke picked at his food completely uninterested. "Kurenai-sensei why are we here? It's only about three hundred miles to Konoha. We could be there in five hours."

Kurenai sighed and ate some rice. "Sasuke, I am as anxious as any of you to get home and find out what happened. But we've been

moving all day and need to rest. We'll be back home by early afternoon tomorrow. It's not as though it makes a difference now."

Sasuke grunted. Well that was true. They had completed their C-rank without any trouble and just as they were leaving they heard the news. Konoha had been attacked by the sound and sand villages. After some vicious and bloody fighting they had won and repelled the invaders. And that was *all* they knew. They had been moving at top speed the last two days to get back home. They knew their village had won. But the fate of friends, family, and homes remained unknown. He wished he could pick up a phone or even a high powered radio communicator and call the leaf village. But such things didn't exist of course.

"Doesn't it bother you that while we were having an easy time in Tea country our village was fighting off an attack?" Sasuke asked. "I mean we missed a *war* !"

Kurenai frowned but continued to eat her dinner. "Of course it bothers me Sasuke. If the fighting were still going on I would have us moving until we reached Konoha. But since the battle is over there would be no point in exhausting ourselves just to get home a day earlier. Everything is decided and whether we arrive today or tomorrow will not change anything."

"Kurenai-sensei is correct," Shino droned. "It is only logical that as there is no longer an emergency that we arrive there in good condition."

Sakura reached out and put a hand gently over his. "I'm sure when we reach home everything will be fine Sasuke-kun."

He pulled his hand away. He really wasn't in the mood to try and deal with her. He got up from the table and put down some ryu notes. "I'm not hungry. I'm going for a walk." With that he walked out.

Sakura was quickly on her feet. "Let him go Sakura." Kurenai advised. "I think he wants to be alone right now."

"But I just want to help." Sakura objected.

"He won't appreciate it." Kurenai said with a glum certainty. "Give him some room for now." Sakura let out a sigh but sat back down.

---

Sasuke walked dejectedly through the little village's streets. He was worried about his mom and the rest of his clan. He was also bitterly frustrated that he had missed a golden chance to prove himself. Konoha had been attacked and he hadn't even been there. He'd been more than a thousand miles away safe. He wanted to be great. He *needed* to be great. Yet everything seemed to conspire against him. He couldn't even manage to find his way into a war for kami's sake!

"Sasuke."

He stopped to look at an unfamiliar face. The person who had called to him was obviously a ninja. He had white hair and two little red dots in the middle of his brow. Whoever he was he was not a leaf nin. He pulled out a pair of kunai. "Who are you?"

"My name is Kimimaro and I serve a powerful master who wishes to meet you. I believe we have an acquaintance in common."

Sasuke's interest was immediately peaked. "Who might that be?"

"Like you he hides his true face." Sasuke smiled. "If you seek power and are ready to bargain for it come with me." Kimimaro leapt away. Sasuke hesitated only an instant before following.

---

There were six Great Houses of Suna. These were the six clans who originally founded Suna and they had always wielded the greatest power in the village. As clan head of Osama Sulamon was the only clan head to have survived the battle (by not going to it.) The other five had all died in Konoha; the new clan heads were all younger and inexperienced.

Sulamon nodded. "I thank you all for coming here. To begin with the Council pf Wind has decided to yield to the demands received by us from the Hokage. That decision **is** made. I have not asked you here to decide what course we shall follow. I have asked you here to assist me and our village in carrying out the harsh demands we are now faced with. Have no doubt the terms **are** harsh. But also do not doubt that we are faced with only two choices; accepting them or destruction. We can **not** hope to withstand an attack by Konoha and their jinchuuriki. Therefore to preserve our village and the lives of out people the Council and I have made the decision to surrender." He puffed on his pipe a bit to give them the chance to speak. He was very relieved to see none of them willing to challenge him. They simply nodded. That was good. Clan heads could sometimes get very stubborn at the worst of times.

"Very well, let me read to you the terms." He held the document and began to go over the main points. "To begin with Suna surrenders unconditionally to the village within the leaves and accepts all moral responsibility for this conflict and for the breeching of our alliance. We agree to pay war reparations to the amount of 300 million ryu."

"WHAT?!" More than one of them screeched. "That will ruin us!" One of them said.

"I believe that is the point." Sulamon said dryly.

"That sum is ridiculous there is no way we could raise it!"

"Only 100 million is due immediately. We shall have to pay 20 million each year for the next ten tears." Sulamon stated.

"Even so how can we raise 100 million ryu so quickly?"

"Simple," Sulamon said. "Each of the six Great Houses will have to contribute 15 million ryu. The remaining ten million we shall raise through loans and tapping our reserves. We of the founding houses are the only ones with enough ready cash." Before they could begin

screaming he continued. "I have already given the 15 million from Osama."

Temari jumped in. "Since Sabaku is the richest, and as the leader of our clan was the Kazekage who led us into this situation we will commit 25 million so you will not need to empty the treasury."

Sulamon nodded to her appreciatively. He doubted anyone else present would have made such a gesture. "I warmly thank you for your generosity and willingness to sacrifice in this desperate hour. I am certain the rest of us shall follow your example." Some of the four did not like it. But with the two strongest houses willing they would seem unforgivably selfish and small minded if they did not. So the four of them all agreed.

"Now then the next point, Suna ninjas will not be permitted to accept missions in any land save that of Wind. They are also permanently forbidden to attend any future Chunin exams or tournaments. Suna is forbidden to sign any treaties with foreign powers or make war without the permission of the Leaf village."

"These terms are impossible!" The objection came. "To accept them would destroy us!"

"To refuse them would destroy us." Sulamon said. "I told you the terms were harsh. Please remember that had we crushed them instead our conditions would have been no more merciful." He took a deep breath. "These terms are designed to ruin us as one of the five great powers. From this time forward we shall be a local power like Grass or Waterfall."

"How can we do that?" The objector looked about hoping for support. "We cannot accept these terms when we know the disgrace it will bring! It would be better to resist and to die fighting!"

"Say that only if you truly mean it. For if we resist we *will* die fighting." Sulamon answered.

Temari turned to the objector; he was only a few years older than she was. "Tell me were you actually there in Konoha? Did you see the actual fighting?" She spoke derisively.

The man looked embarrassed and she knew the answer before he spoke. "No."

"Well I was!" She looked around at everyone. "Of all the people in this room I was the only one who was there. And let me tell you something I saw and *felt* Naruto's, their jinchuuriki's, power first hand. If he comes here we will all die. All the ninja we have left would last maybe five minutes against him. It's all well and good to talk about avoiding disgrace and making a last stand, it sounds very heroic. Maybe some day someone will make an epic poem about the fall of Suna. Is that what you want though? Do you really want everyone to die and our village to be destroyed?"

"Do you want us to be condemned to never be more than a small weak village?" He shot back.

"No, but that choice is gone. We lost that choice in less than an hour's fighting in the leaf village." Temari declared. "Even if we fight our glory is lost. We can no more restore it then we can restore our war dead. Forget about our greatness. Now it is only a question of survival or death."

"Sabaku no Temari speaks the truth." Sulamon said. "What was lost in Konoha cannot be restored no matter what we do. We must act to preserve our village."

The objector seemed to shrink in his seat as the others all nodded. "Could we not at least try and negotiate to lessen some of these terms?"

Sulamon shook his head. "The terms are not negotiable. And we must accept or reject them within six days or the Hokage promises continued war." He paused and was relieved that there were no more objections. "There is one more major condition. To ensure we

abide by this surrender each of the noble houses must give up a member to be hostage and to live in Konoha."

"For how long?"

Sulamon shrugged. "For as long as they wish, perhaps permanently." Surprisingly there were no objections over that. Taking hostages was an ancient custom that almost always involved the noble class. Once they accepted the idea of surrender the idea of hostages came easily.

The meeting lasted for another twenty minutes as details were worked out. As the clan heads began to leave he asked Temari to remain.

Once they were alone he spoke to her. "Temari, I thank you for your support. You made them see the truth of the situation."

She shrugged. "You were in the right. Our choices are to surrender or fight. We can't fight, so we have to surrender."

Sulamon nodded. "There is something I need to discuss with you."

She grinned. "It's about me becoming a hostage isn't it?"

He slowly nodded. "The terms require one hostage from each of the six Great Houses and you are the last member of Sabaku."

"I understand." She said simply. "I was ready to fight and die for Suna. If it helps the village I can be a hostage for Suna."

"I can do nothing right now, but perhaps in a year or two the Hokage might be open to an exchange to allow you to return."

Temari shook her head. "Don't bother. With my brothers gone I have nothing left to bind me here."

"But this is your home! Don't you want to return?"



She shook her head. "No I have never had friends and I have no family now. Wherever I am I will be alone."

"But what about the Sabaku name?" He asked.

She thought of all the pain and suffering that name had brought to Gaara and the village. "What about it?" With a slight bow she left, she would have to pack.

---

Kimimaro brought him to a clearing just outside the village. To say Sasuke was disappointed would have been an understatement. There was a pale sweaty sickly looking ninja leaning against a tree. He was wearing a bulky black robe that completely covered him from the neck down. His first impression was one of frailty and weakness. This was hardly the sort of ninja he'd had in mind.

"You're Kabuto's master?" He asked questioningly.

Kimimaro sent him a cold glare. "Show lord Orochimaru respect!"

"Orochimaru?!" Sasuke jumped back and drew his kunai. "You led the attack on Konoha!"

Orochimaru smiled and laughed. "Yessss and my only regret is that I failed to destroy it." He chuckled. "Though I did take a little satisfaction in killing the third lord."

"You killed the third Hokage?"

"That's right. Before you do something stupid like attack me. Let us discuss the reason Kabuto told me of you. You should feel honored; I have gone to a great deal of trouble to meet with you here today and even put myself in a small amount of danger. Now, you want power. I can provide you with power, but in exchange you will become my servant."

"No." He said flatly. "I'm doing this to save my village! I won't betray it!"

Orochimaru grinned. "Ah! An Uchiha with principles. You truly are *his* brother aren't you?"

Sasuke stiffened. "What do you know about Itachi?"

"Quite a bit. We were in the same organization for a time. However I found the experience constraining and decided to go out on my own. Now Itachi really is powerful! If you want to try and match him I can understand why you are looking for help."

"I don't want to match him I want to kill him, him and one other person."

"Who?"

Sasuke frowned. "What does that matter to you?"

"Show respect!" Kimimaro warned.

Orochimaru laughed. "Oh that is all right Sasuke-kun; keep your little grudge a secret. I don't mind. But you'll never be anywhere near Itachi's level without a great deal of help. I can give you that help."

"I won't betray my village." Sasuke said.

"Hmmm, well how about this? You send me a few reports about anything *interesting* that you run across and occasionally take care of a few things for me *outside* the village? How does that sound to you?"

Sasuke considered. He knew he was making a deal with the devil. *Damn it I'm too weak! I need more power to save the village and avenge my father.* "You won't expect me to kill anyone in the village then?"

"No, but you may need to do some killing elsewhere."

"That doesn't bother me, I'm a ninja." He slowly nodded. He knew what he was doing was treason. Even worse it was the basest sort of evil. But it was for a greater good he focused in on that. *The ends justify the means.* "I accept."

Orochimaru smiled wickedly. "Then kneel before me and call me master."

His spine stiffened at that. But he slowly went down to his knees. "As you wish... master."

Orochimaru nodded. "Now a few things you must know. This power I will give you will greatly increase your chakra and your physical strength and stamina as well. When you use the power there will be a physical manifestation in the form of black marks upon your skin. The power will come from a seal I will place on you. No doubt when you return your leaders will be frightened of your new power and will try to seal it. I suggest you not let them. You would still be able to draw upon it but things will be easier for you if you are not required to hide its use. The mark takes quite a bit of getting used to. You will be unconscious for anywhere from twelve to twenty four hours. And I recommend you tell your teammates that you followed a suspicious ninja out of the village and were ambushed. Do you understand Sasuke-kun?"

"Yes."

"Yes what?"

Sasuke swallowed. "Yes master."

Orochimaru laughed. Then his neck extended out from his body. Orochimaru's head came to Sasuke's neck where he bit down.

Almost immediately Sasuke was screaming out in pain.

"Let's go, I am done here." Orochimaru spoke and the two of them got going.

"Lord," Kimimaro asked as they leapt through the trees. "You did not mention to him that his odds of survival are only one in ten."

Orochimaru smiled. "Why would I? If he dies it does not matter. If he lives it does not matter. And had he refused because he feared the odds I would have simply killed him." Feeling in a better mood the two of them began the long journey back to the Sound village.

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She was the oldest among the six hostages. The rest were all children. It was generally considered easier for a child to adjust to a possible life long change than someone older. A couple squads of sand nins would escort them to the edge of Wind country and from there they would meet a leaf escort. A small crowd had gathered at the gate to wish them well. To the village they were all heroes sacrificing themselves. The irony was that if they eventually returned in say ten to fifteen years they would be viewed with suspicion as, 'foreigners.' The families were all saying good bye. Sulamon was hugging his little granddaughter and saying farewell. No one came over to her to try and wish her luck or say good bye. It seemed somehow fitting that despite her name and wealth that she should be alone. All of the other hostages would have wagons follow them to Konoha filled with possessions. Hostages were treated very well, and usually permitted to live comfortably with whatever they brought with them. She had filled one back pack. She had a few personal items and some clothes. She would buy whatever else she needed in Konoha.

As they left she took one last long look around the village of Suna. She was sad to be leaving but not heart broken. As she went out the gate there were two things on her mind. She felt certain that she would never come back to Suna. Somehow she just knew as she left that she would never return. And she wondered if Shikamaru was alive and well and if he would hate her now.

## No feelings at all

Sasuke slowly opened his eyes. He was in a hospital bed. He felt... different.

"Oh Sasuke-kun! Thank kami you're awake!"

"Oh my precious little boy! Are you all right?"

He slowly focused and saw both Sakura and his mom were smiling down at him. "Sakura? Kaasan? Where am I? What happened?"

"You are in Konoha hospital son." His mother said gently.

"You were missing and so we went looking for you." Sakura explained fearfully. "We found you knocked out and with a strange mark on your neck. We tried to wake you. I tried to use my medical ninjutsu but you wouldn't wake and I could tell your condition was serious. We decided we had to get you here for treatment. Kurenai carried you on her back the whole way." She was desperately sorry. "I tried to heal you but I couldn't! When we got here the Hokage helped you as much as she could but said you would have to live or die depending on your own will. I knew you would be all right Sasuke-kun I knew it!"

On instinct he tried to reach out for chakra. Normally when he did so it would fill him like a stream of water filling a bucket. But now it came to him in a flood. Oh the delicious power! It came and it came and kept coming like an endless river. Both Sakura and his mother gasped. He held out his hands and saw black marks appear on them.

"Son!" Mikoto cried out. "What's happening?"

"Sasuke-kun are you all right?"

He looked at her and sent her a smile she had never seen before.  
"All right? Sakura I've never been better!"

---

By the time Tsunade had arrived to check on him Riyuki and Kurenai were there along with Sakura and Mikoto. The two Uchiha adults were having a quiet but heated argument in the corner while Sakura and Kurenai were standing beside Sasuke's bed looking worried.

"Anyone care to tell me what happened?" Tsunade asked.  
Immediately five people were talking quickly and at full volume.  
"Hold it! Hold it! Just one person please!"

"It's really very simple Hokage-sama." Sasuke spoke. He'd been awake long enough to know *exactly* what he wanted to say. "I spotted this weird looking ninja in the village we were in. I decided to follow him in case he was a sound of sand nin. I followed him to a small clearing and was about to confront him when I felt a horrible pain in my neck. The next thing I knew I woke up here." He gave her a smile. "I wanted to make sure I was completely fine so I tried to mold some chakra. That's when I discovered my amazing good luck! Whatever happened to me has made me far more powerful than I was before!"

She frowned at him, not really surprised that he would see it that way. "So, it's just as I suspected. You have a curse seal mark on your neck Sasuke. As surprising as it may be it seems you had a run in with Orochimaru."

"Orochimaru?" Riyuki said in disbelief. "Then why was he spared?"

Tsunade answered. "That seal has a 90 percent fatality rate. The snake bastard must have thought he would die and it would be just like him to leave someone to a slow and painful death."

Sasuke smiled. *A 90 percent fatality rate? The bastard didn't mention that. But what does it matter now?* "Well I guess I beat the odds then and I just got an incredible boost to my power!"

"Sasuke! That seal is evil! Just like everything else that monster has ever created!" Tsunade informed him. "As soon as I can get in touch with Jiraiya I am going to have him place a suppressing seal over it."

"Suppress it? Hokage-sama I don't want it suppressed! With the power it gives me I can be one of the village's greatest ninja! Let me use this power to serve the village and you!"

Tsunade shook her head. "No Sasuke! It will be suppressed for your own safety. That seal's power is unnatural and would slowly corrupt and taint you."

Riyuki spoke up. "Do you mean in the same way the Kyuubi's unnatural power will corrupt and taint Naruto?"

"WHAT?!" Sakura shouted. "What are you talking about?" Of the people present she was the only one who did not know.

Kurenai and Sasuke both looked at him in surprise. "Riyuki," Kurenai said. "Do you realize you have just broken the Sandaime's law and committed a capital offence?"

"That law has been repealed Kurenai. Everyone now knows the truth." Ryuki replied calmly.

"It's true." Tsunade confirmed. "Since the battle and his rather large part in it hiding the truth has been impossible. It has become common knowledge both within and without the village."

Sakura's mouth was hanging open. "Wait! So Naruto is the Kyuubi?! He's..."

"I'll explain it to you later." Kurenai assured her.

Sasuke grinned. "Does that mean that some of the Kyuubi's power came out during the battle?"

Tsunade frowned. "Quite a lot of it did. You don't seem surprised how did you find out?"

Mikoto answered. "His older brother informed him four years ago before..."

Sasuke nodded quickly. "I've known for awhile. But any way since his power finally came out does that mean people have been demanding he be exiled or worse?" Sasuke couldn't help but sound a little smug.

Tsunade sent him a hostile scowl. "Hardly! They bow and cheer for him now! They finally recognize him as a hero!"

"Naruto? A hero?" Sasuke could not believe it. What was *wrong* with people? How could they not understand that a power like the Kyuubi's could not possibly be contained?

"That's not all," Riyuku added. "He has also been promoted to Jonin."

" **WHAT?!**" Sasuke practically shouted. He glared at the Hokage. "I can see what having friends in the right places can do for a person."

"Watch your mouth Sasuke!" Tsunade shouted back. "Naruto *earned* his promotion! He, Jiraiya, and Sarutobi were the great heroes of this battle! He killed the Kazekage and at least three hundred enemy ninjas! He broke the Suna army and helped bring the battle to a swift end. And whether you have a petty jealousy of him or not he *is* a hero and a Jonin."

Sasuke bit down on a bitter reply having had his nose rubbed in how much Naruto had accomplished. Despite his newly gained power he felt Naruto once again leaving him behind.

"There is no denying that Naruto did an amazing job during the battle." Riyuki acknowledged. "But of course that was because he had the Kyuubi's power at his disposal. I did not see it myself but those who did all agreed that the Kyuubi's chakra held a powerful taint of evil. Can we trust that Naruto will have the necessary strength to keep it under his control?"



"Of course we can!" Tsunade answered immediately. "I know Naruto will be able to handle the Kyuubi's power."

Riyuki smiled and sprung his trap. "Yet you do not trust Sasuke to control the power he has received. Where precisely is the difference? If you feel safe to leave Naruto with the Kyuubi's chakra, then how can you object to Sasuke using his new power?"

Tsunade frowned. *Because Naruto is the most special of special cases! And because he actually acts out of a sense of love and duty. Where Sasuke follows his own ambitions. That's why I trust Naruto and not Sasuke.* Unfortunately she couldn't come right out and say that. And unfortunately any argument she chose to make would be based on the fact that she trusted Naruto but not Sasuke with the burden.

Seeing her pause Riyuki pushed on. "Sasuke and I both wish for him to keep the seal mark and use it for the good of the village. Just as Naruto is able to use the Kyuubi's tainted chakra. Please allow him to use Orochimaru's tainted gift."

"I want to suppress the curse mark for his own good as well as the village's! It would damage his psyche over time."

Riyuki shook his head. "I have faith in my nephew's will and strength of character. He does not want the seal suppressed and neither does his clan." Mikoto looked troubled but remained silent. "And unlike a certain other matter the Uchiha clan has the highest interest in this. We absolutely insist Sasuke be left as is."

*Both of you are pompous idiots!* She knew this would be a mistake. Unfortunately she couldn't really afford to antagonize the clan too much. She let out a deep sigh. "Very well, as the clan insists I will leave the mark as is. However I hold you and the Uchiha clan responsible for his actions!"

Riyuki bowed to her. "Of course."

Sasuke smiled. He had won.

---

Three days had passed since Sasuke's return to the village. Shikamaru stood in the Hokage's office with some other leaders of Konoha's clans. Uchiha Mikoto, Hyuga Hiashi, Aburame Shibi, and Inuzuka Tsume were all present as was a certain annoying blonde. He grinned at his friend. "Shouldn't you be in your room right now? I mean I wouldn't want you to get in more trouble."

"My mom considers this a duty so it's o.k." Naruto grumbled.

Shikamaru grinned. "Does that mean you have to go straight home afterwards?"

Naruto sent him a flat look. "Yeah."

Shikamaru chuckled. "You know Naruto you have got to be the first Jonin in history to actually have his mom ground him." He eyed his friend a bit specutively. "Anyway shouldn't your mom be doing this?"

"She's training her team right now. She said I should do it, that it would be good experience for when I'm clan head." In turn Naruto eyed his lazy friend. "Why are you here Shikamaru? Isn't Yoshino clan head now?"

Shika sighed. "Yeah, she is. But she's still having a really rough time dealing with dad being gone. Right now she is staying with the Yamanaka's, they're sort of helping each other with the loss."

"So your mom just left you all alone?"

Shikamaru smirked. "You make that sound like a bad thing Naruto. Any way it's not like she's left the country or anything. If I need to see her I know where she is."

Tsunade entered being trailed by Shizune. It was one of the handful of times she wore the robes of her office. She looked to be in an

excellent mood. Being able to avoid a continuation of the war with Sand had made her happy. And having been shown a couple huge trunks stuffed with ryo notes hadn't hurt either.

"I want to thank all of you and your clans for agreeing to house and care for the hostages. As you all know there are still some hard feelings running against Suna. Even so I hope you will remember that I want these people to be well treated. They are not our enemies. They are not our prisoners. They are honored guests and I hope you will treat them in that manner. They may be here for a very long time. It is quite possible that they will never leave. Please make them feel welcome."

In short order the hostages were led into the Hokage's office. Shikamaru felt his heart skip a beat. He hadn't thought he would ever see her again. Yet there she was not ten feet away. She looked very different. He'd thought her previous hairstyle very strange (consider the source) but now she had it cut very short like a boy's hair. She was dressed in a black kimono just as the children were. She was also missing that cocky attitude and smile he had come to like so much. Now she looked very somber and serious. Well he could understand why. It couldn't be easy leaving family and friends behind. When she spotted him there was a quick flash of surprise and... guilt? She immediately broke eye contact and looked to the floor. He wanted very badly to talk to her but knew he needed to wait.

Naruto did not miss the little interaction. As the Hokage officially welcomed them to the village Naruto whispered to his friend. "What's with you and the girl?"

He took a deep breath. This was going to be sooo troublesome he could tell. Girls, by their very nature were troublesome, but Temari was sure to be a whole category unto herself. But he couldn't help feeling something for her. "We sort of hung out together the week before the finals."

Naruto gave him a very surprised look. Shikamaru had to be the absolute last guy he would ever imagine chasing a foreign kunoichi. For one thing he had stated his opinion of girls loud and clear many, many times; they were loud and bothersome (except for Hinata.) For another thing... "Isn't being with a girl like that a little too troublesome for you?" Naruto whispered.

Shika sighed. "You would think so." He decided to let the subject drop there for the time being and Naruto spared him an inquisition.

The welcoming ceremony was brief and each of the hostages was assigned to the clan that would be responsible for them. Temari was assigned to Namikaze while a little eight year old girl named Alysa would go with Nara. Naruto remembered the girl well from both their original run in and from the battle. She clearly remembered him too and looked a bit nervous. She had flirted with him a little but having seen dozens of his clones come after her with bloodlust in their red eyes had changed her opinion of him.

She offered him a formal bow. "Naruto-dono I thank you for taking responsibility for me. I assure you I shall behave properly and respectfully at all times."

Naruto gave her a smile. "Glad to hear it. Just so you know I don't bear you any grudge. I understand you were doing your duty as I was."

She nodded. "I do understand that and I bear you no hostility, despite what you took from me."

His smile disappeared. "Did I kill someone close to you?"

She nodded but kept a placid look on her face. "My male parent (she refused to call him father) and my brother Kankuro were both killed by your wind jutsu."

"I am sorry." Naruto said quietly.

Temari shook her head. "You were defending your home from invasion. I understand and truly do not blame you."

"Are you all right Temari?" Shikamaru had been standing right there listening. His words were low but the look in his eyes was filled with emotion.

She blushed just a little bit as she nodded. "I am fine Shikamaru. Are you all right?"

He sighed. "Yes, but I lost my father."

"Not Shikaku!" She reached out and put a comforting hand on his arm. "Oh Shikamaru I am so sorry!" And though she was not the sort to normally do so she put her arms around him and hugged him. "I am so sorry."

He put his arms around her as well. "I'm sorry too Temari."

They remained in each other's arms for a short while. "Do you hate me?" She whispered to him.

He pulled back just enough to look in her teal eyes. "No, never."

She swallowed a bit. "When we said good bye. I wanted to tell you but I..." Her voice just sort of trailed off.

He nodded. "I know." He said simply.

While the two of them had been hugging Naruto had gotten a little grin on his face and sauntered over to his godmother. He spoke to her quietly. She looked at the two who were hugging and chuckled. She nodded to Naruto who crossed the room again. He put a hand on the shoulder of the little girl named Alysa. She looked up at him nervously.

"All right, we're trading." Naruto said.

"What?" Shikamaru and Temari regretfully pulled apart.

Naruto gave his friend a knowing grin. "The Hokage says it's fine if we exchange assignments. I'll take Alysa here and Temari can go home with you."

"Can you do that?" Skikamaru said in surprise.

"It's all ready done." He turned to the little girl. "Well Alysa my name is Namikaze Naruto. You'll be staying with me and my mom and our friend Haku."

Despite looking nervous the little girl bowed to him. "Yes Naruto-dono. I promise that I shall behave myself and be a proper guest at all times."

"Just Naruto is fine. Come on I'll take you to your new home."

"Naruto," Shika said. "I owe you one."

He had a good laugh. "Yeah you do."

---

As they walked through the streets people made way. Some bowed, some cheered but they all looked on proudly.

"Is this how all clan heads are treated here?" Alysa asked.

Naruto shook his head. "No, I'm not a clan head, and this is only since the battle. Before that as many people hated me as liked me."

"Why?"

He looked at her. She would find out eventually. "I am a jinchuuriki and possess the Kyuubi."

She stumbled but quickly righted her self with out help. She looked up at him paling.

"There is no need to be scared. I possess the demon but I am not him. I am my own charming self." He tried to give her a reassuring

smile.

She slowly nodded. The only jinchuuriki she had ever heard of or seen was Gaara of course, and he was the stuff of nightmares. Naruto seemed as different from Gaara as night and day. "Naruto, may I ask you a question, and please forgive me if I offend."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Ask me anything you like."

She swallowed. "Have you ever... murdered anyone?" She knew that was not a good question to ask, but she really needed to know.

"Murdered?" he said in surprise. He shook his head. "I'm a ninja. I've *killed*. I've killed an awful lot actually after the battle. But I've only ever killed in defense or in the line of duty. I have never murdered anyone and never would."

She believed him and nodded. Maybe all jinchuuriki were not the same.

---

She felt a huge relief arriving at the Nara household. Many of the people on the street had sent her harsh looks. Shikamaru had put an arm around her protectively and sent his own glares back. If he had tried to do that a couple weeks before she would have pushed him aside and smacked him with her fan. For that matter if people had given her looks she would have glared right back and asked what the problem was. Now things were different. She knew why so many of them looked at her with hate. She would have to accept it. She was no longer kunoichi. She had surrendered her fan and all her weapons to the ANBU who had escorted her. Upon arriving in Konoha she had surrendered her hitai-ite. She had to behave like a hostage now, not like a ninja. No violence and no running away.

"Where is your mother? I want to offer her my condolences."

"She's staying with some friends right now. If you want we can see her tomorrow."

She gave him a surprised look. "So we're all alone?"

"That's right."

"I see." For the first time in quite awhile a grin touched her lips. She leaned in close to Shikamaru. "Well in that case I guess you had better go ahead and take advantage of me."

He immediately stiffened and took a step back. His face was as red as a ripe apple. "What?" he said in panic.

He saw just a little of that cocky girl he had liked so much. "I said you should take advantage of me... by letting me make you a nice dinner. Unless you actually know how to cook?" He quickly shook his head. "I know where the kitchen is, relax and I'll make us something to eat. Then after that we can play some shogi." With that she strode into the kitchen as though it were hers and he was the guest.

He stood there in there living room for a bit and slowly came to *really* understand that this girl was going to be *living* here with him. He was going to see her every day he was in the village. She would probably end up becoming close friends with his mother.

"Oh Kami what have I done?"

---

Two cloaked figures stood on a hill overlooking the ruins of what had once been the south wall.

"Not long ago it was at the height of its glory, now look at it." One of them said quietly.

The second one looked over to the first. Such sentiments were a rare thing from him. He sent his partner a toothy grin. "Is that sadness I hear in your voice? Do you still have some feelings for your old home?"



The other looked at him blankly over a high collar. "No," the answer came in the familiar dead tone. "No feelings at all."

## Little sister

**Author's Note:** Could anyone please tell me the japanese word for little sister? Thanks.

---

They were sitting down to dinner. She did not have much of an appetite. She couldn't help but notice that her son was in fine spirits. Despite having been ambushed and infected with that evil he seemed to be in a better mood than she could remember in a long time. Her brother in law was also in a fine spirits. So far as he was concerned what had happened was nothing but a blessing. Even Gabrella seemed happier than she had been for some time. She and her father had cotton into an acrimonious fight over her remaining with Kushina as sensei. Gabrella was absolutely adamant that she remain with her current team. Not only did she seem to greatly admire Kushina but Mikoto got the sense there was something going on with her teammate as well. Despite their disagreement over her squad Gabrella and her father seemed to be drawing a bit closer. Now that his daughter had finally achieved sharingan he seemed convinced things would work out. Whenever he spoke of her to others it was with words of praise and joy. Since the battle and her activation Gabrella had become much more confident and happier.

"You know I still can't believe you finally activated your sharingan." Sasuke teased.

In response she closed her eyes and revealed it. She had shown it to him before of course, but she didn't mind. "Well you had best believe it. And I am getting stronger; Kushina is teaching me how to use the blade. She says with my sharingan and the way I work at it I should be a first level blade master by the time the next Chunin exams roll around."

Riyuki frowned a bit as he always did when he heard his daughter praising *that woman* . But he wasn't looking to spoil the good mood.

"The next exams are being held in Mist. Does she say anything about letting you compete? You would need a third member for your squad."

Gabrella nodded. "She says that if Haku and I continue to progress she will definitely nominate us for the exams. She also says she will see about a finding us a third member sometime soon."

"Well I have no doubt that you will be Chunin this time around." Riyuki said confidently.

"You know honey if you like I could give you some additional training." She stopped eating and stared at him. "Something wrong?"

"You haven't called me, 'honey' in a very long time dad." Gabrella said quietly. "You haven't wanted to help me train for awhile too."

"I know," her father spoke a bit sadly. He took a very deep breath. "I am sorry for not having more faith in you my daughter. I should have. But my heart is bursting with pride in you! You make me very proud and I would like to help you as much as I can."

A slow smile blossomed on her face. She had never, ever expected to hear him say that. She didn't think he knew the words, 'I am sorry.' But hearing that and hearing him say he was proud of her made her happy. There were still issues between them, but she did love

him and wanted him to be proud of her. "I would like that daddy."

Riyuki grinned. "Good! And do you mind if I call you honey or are you too old for that?"

She laughed a bit. It felt so good to have his approval. "No dad, you can call me that."

"Good thing he's going to help you." Sasuke teased. "If you want to even stay near me you'll need all the help you can get."

"Hey, me and Haku will definitely make Chunin at the next exams!"

Riyuki laughed and applauded. "That's my girl!"

Mikoto looked at the end of the table where a quiet seven year old was eating. "Are you enjoying your meal Meiju?"

The boy looked up nervously. "Oh yes! It is very good! Thank you Mikoto." With the boy's blonde hair and green eyes he easily stood out in the Uchiha compound. He was clearly afraid of offending and trying to find his place.

"Sasuke," Mikoto asked. "Why don't you show Meiju around the village tomorrow?"

Sasuke shook his head. "I have training with my squad tomorrow."

"You could do it before that." Mikoto smiled hopefully. "Maybe the two of you can get to know each other."

"I'd really rather not waste the time." Mikoto frowned at her son and Meiju looked down nervously.

"Ah, why don't I show him around?" Gabrella offered. She turned to him with a playful grin. "I can introduce you to my team and get you some ice cream. How does that sound?"

The boy looked up at her hopefully. "That sounds like fun, thank you."

Mikoto nodded. "Sasuke, I would like a word in private with you right now." She got up from the table and left the dining room.

With a dramatic sigh Sasuke pushed back from the table and stood as well. "Excuse me."

Meiju looked unhappy as the boy left. "I hope I did not cause any trouble."

Gabrella shook her head. "Don't worry it has nothing to do with you."

---

"Did you enjoy your dinner Alysa-chan?" Kushina asked with a gentle smile.

The little girl nodded. "Yes, thank you, it was very good Kushina-san."

Kushina shook her head slightly. "You will probably be staying here for a very long time. While you are here I would like you to consider yourself to be a part of this family. Of course, since I know you have a family in Suna I cannot actually adopt you. But I would like to treat you as my daughter, and I would like it very much if you would call me mother."

The girl looked up at Kushina and very slowly smiled. "I would like that... mother."

"Good!" She immediately took the girl in a hug and began giving her kisses. "I always wanted to have a daughter!"

"Thanks mom." Naruto said.

Kushina chuckled as she let Alysa go. "You know what I mean dear."

"Sure mom." Naruto went over to Alysa and patted the top of her head. "Well I guess that would make you my little sister." The girl began to blush immediately.

"Hai."

Haku approached and also smiled at the little girl. "Please think of me as a friend and someone who will watch out for you."

"Arigato, Haku." She looked shyly at Naruto who was giving her one of his big smiles.

"Should I call you niisan?"

"I'd like that, little sister." Alysa's blush darkened just a bit.

"Naruto why don't you take her around the village tomorrow before you meet with your team?"

"Sure mom."

---

"A doll?" He asked with a grin.

Temari sent him a dangerous look as she set the doll down in a chair in her new room. "And what is wrong with a girl having a doll?"

"Aren't you just a little old for dolls?" Shikamaru asked.

"Sandy isn't here as a toy. I brought her as a reminder of what little happiness I had growing up."

Shikamaru had a huge grin. "Your doll's name is Sandy?"

"Yes it is." She crossed her arms. "I suppose you never had a childhood toy?"

He shrugged. "I might have but I'll never admit to it."

"Whatever," she grumbled. "Now did you want to play shogi?"

He nodded. "Sure." They exited her room. "You know dinner was really good."

"You sound surprised."

"Well I am. I didn't think a scary girl like you would know how to boil water. Ow!" He rubbed the top of his head. "What was that for?"

"That was for assuming a woman can't be strong and still be able to be a good cook."

He continued to rub his head as he frowned at her. "You know you're starting to remind me of my mom."

She gave him a huge smile. "Thanks!" She hurried down the stairs.

"That wasn't a compliment." He muttered to himself.

---

"What is it kaasan?"

Mikoto frowned at him. "Sasuke I want you to spend some time with Meiju."

"Why?" Sasuke asked.

"Because he will be here for a very long time and I would like for the two of you to become close." She gave him an encouraging smile.

"Maybe he could become like a little brother to you."

But Sasuke shook his head. "No thanks! One brother is enough! Mother I'll be polite to him, I'll treat him like an honored guest. But I don't have time to waste pretending he's something that he's not."

"And what is so very important Sasuke that you have so little free time?"

"I need to get stronger! I need to increase my power! Afterall I'm still just a Genin. I need to put all my time in becoming more."

"You mean like Itachi?" She asked coldly.

"Mom, I'm nothing like him!"

"If that's true then let the Hokage have that curse seal suppressed."

"Mom..."

"Hear me out!" She demanded. Sasuke frowned but closed his mouth. "The man who gave this terrible thing to you possesses the sharingan. It is almost certain that he gained it through the murder of Uchiha Damas. To accept *anything* from him under any circumstances is an insult to Damas's memory. That seal on your

neck son may give you more power but please consider the cost! You heard the Hokage say it would damage your mind over time! It's a poisonous infection that will only do you harm. Whatever power it gives you it is not worth the price."

"Power is worth any price." Sasuke said defiantly.

"I could imagine Itachi saying the same thing."

The look he gave her was clearly hurt. "Mom I'm not anything like Itachi!"

"I am no longer so sure son." Mikoto said quietly. "When I hear that hunger in your voice to gain power it makes me shudder a little. You are beginning to scare me son. You are walking the same path as your brother. He put gaining power ahead of everything else too."

"Kaasan you don't understand! I don't want power for selfish reasons! I only want it to protect this village!" *And to kill my brother.*

Mikoto shook her head. "The ends justify the means? Is that it?" Sasuke nodded. "Son those words have been used to justify horrors all throughout history. At every massacre I'm sure they've been said in one form or another. Sasuke the ends do *not* justify the means. Some things are simply wrong and should not be done regardless."

"Mom you're not a ninja! You don't understand it."

"No, I am not a ninja. But I have lived within a ninja clan for most of my life. Do not think me ignorant of the ways of the shinobi." She sighed. "Son I have decided to resign as clan head. Your uncle can have the position."

"What? But why? Don't you want to be clan head?"

"No. I tried to have the curse seal suppressed but Riyuki told me that if I insisted he would assemble the clan council to have me replaced.



If I cannot even protect my own son then there is no point in my keeping the title."

"But being clan head will still give you a lot of power." Sasuke argued.

"Perhaps," she said sadly. "But for me it is no longer worth the price."

---

She'd had a good evening. Except for a few minutes when he had gone upstairs for something she had spent all her time with Shikamaru. He was lazy and annoying and had some stupid ideas about women; but she did like being with him. Returning to her room she immediately noted that Sandy had been moved. There on the chair Sandy had some company. A plush toy deer was sitting with her. Sandy's arms had been placed so that she seemed to be hugging the deer. She also noticed a piece of paper on the chair as well. Picking it up she read out what was written there.

"Cloud is very happy to have Sandy here." She put the paper down and laughed. Looking at the little deer she addressed him. "Well Cloud, Sandy is very happy to be here too."

---

The next day Naruto was scheduled to meet his team at the bridge at 9, like usual. He intended to actually get there at about 10:30, again as usual. He expected Kakashi to show up at 11. That gave him most of the morning to show Alysa the village. As he walked around he showed her all the important sights; the tower, the academy, Ichiraku's, the market place, and other places he thought important or interesting. Wherever they went people greeted them with good cheer and with kindness. Alysa felt very welcome and safe in her new home. When she mentioned she was a little tired Naruto picked her up and put her on his shoulders.

"Eek!"

Naruto laughed. "You all right?"

"Uhm, yes niisan I am. You don't have to do this I can walk I'm only a little tired." Alysa sounded a little embarrassed.

"Don't worry I'm pretty strong and I don't mind." They walked along for a while.

"Niisan?"

"Yes?"

"Are you really the jinchuuriki with the Kyuubi?"

He chuckled. "I'm afraid I am. Why? Do you think someone would make up something like that?"

"Well, I saw Gaara in the village and I knew the stories about him. He was *very* scary."

"I met him. I can believe people were scared of him. People here used to be very scared of me too. Very angry as well."

"But you're nothing like Gaara was!" Alysa exclaimed. "You're so, so... nice! I always thought, everyone always thought, Gaara was the way he was because of the demon."

Naruto shook his head. "Actually the only ways Kyuubi affected me on a daily basis were the whisker marks you see on my cheeks and in how much chakra I had. I am the way I am because of my mom and because of the people who loved me growing up. I don't know Gaara's story but he was the way he was because of how he was treated growing up."

"But he was the Kazekage's son!" Alysa protested. "He lived in the largest mansion in Suna!"

"So? Little sister, it wasn't all the money and possessions I had that mattered to me growing up. For me my mother and her love meant everything. If I had grown up without her I'd have been miserable and lonely even living in a mansion."

Alysa nodded. "In that case I'm very glad mother was there for you."

He laughed. "Me too."

He brought her to the park. It was till early but there were some young children playing with parents and some older people. It was a beautiful morning. Naruto was having a good time showing his new little sister some of his favorite spots. Until he felt two chakra signatures, one very familiar. He quickly put Alysa down. She could see that his face was no longer cheerful.

"Is something wrong niisan?" She asked.

"Yes. Alyssa I want you to go the park entrance and wait for me there please."

"But why?" She sounded a bit hurt.

He tried to give her a smile. "I have to take care of something. Please just wait for me."

She slowly nodded. "All right niisan. Will you be long?"

"Yes, I think I might." He calmly watched her go and flipped his radio communicator to the send position. "You may as well come out now."

Two ninja with black robes with red clouds on them appeared. One he did not recognize. He had blue skin and a large bundle on his back. The other ninja he knew quite well.

"Who is the little one?" Itachi asked calmly.

"She is a hostage from Suna who has come to live with my family." Naruto stated.

"The two of you seem close." Itachi observed.

"Please leave her and the other civilians here out of this."

Itachi shrugged. "I have no objection to that. My business is with you only Naruto-kun."

"And what business is that Itachi-kun? Since we're in the park I presume you and your friend here have come to have a picnic by the lake."

The blue skinned ninja laughed. "Oh I like him! He's got guts! Almost makes me regret what we are about to do."

Naruto nodded and got himself ready. "So you're here to kill me."

"No," Itachi spoke. "We are here to capture you Naruto-kun. That is the highest order given to us by the Akatsuki."

"And who or what are the Akatsuki?"

"They are the elite criminal organization that we both serve." Itachi said.

"And why would a criminal organization want me alive? What are you going to do hold me for ransom?"

"No Naruto-kun, we intend to extract that power that we hold inside you."

The other ninja chuckled. "Which by the way will have the side effect of killing you."

"I see." Naruto calmly brought his hands together. "You know I can't let you have the Kyuubi's power."

"Of course." Itachi activated and readied his mangekyo sharingan.

"All right then. Let's go." Leaping back he began to cast his first jutsu.

## A fight in the park

**Author's Note:** Thanks to everyone who answered my question. And just to let you know I should have the next chapter ready tomorrow.

---

Kakashi was sitting in a little tea house enjoying a hot cup as he read a certain orange covered book. It was a little after 10 he still had plenty of time to get to his team for their usual 9 a.m. meeting. He was reading how Tako was trying to convince a buxom blonde judge to drop the charges against him when his radio came to life.

"You may as well come out now." Naruto's voice said.

Kakashi frowned and immediately tried to contact Naruto. Naruto's communicator was clearly still in the, 'send' setting though. From what was coming through Naruto was obviously having a conversation with someone. But he could only hear one half of it.

"And what business is that Itachi-kun? Since we're in the park..."

"Itachi!" Kakashi tossed down some ryu notes and leapt out of the tea house. He switched his radio communicator to the ANBU emergency frequency. "This is Hatake Kakashi declaring an emergency! Uchiha Itachi is attacking Namikaze Naruto at Konoha Park. Please send all available units!" He quickly switched his radio to another frequency.

---

Hinata was doing a little light sparring with Hanabi as her radio came to life. She was pleased at first to hear Naruto's voice. When she realized he wasn't really calling her or Kakashi-sensei she began to worry. When she heard him mention Itachi she fled the Hyuga mansion and raced towards the park.

---

Kiba was walking Akamaru leisurely on his way to the bridge. When Naruto's voice came over the line he listened curiously to it. When Itachi was mentioned he snatched up Akamaru and began leaping the roof tops towards the park.

---

Kushina and Gabrella were practicing sword work with a pair of wooden blades.

"This is so embarrassing." Gabrella complained. Once again Kushina had drawn a circle in the dirt, a much smaller one this time. And it was Kushina stuck in it this time. Though Gabrella also felt a prisoner. "What is the point of this?"

Kushina smiled, she could remember a seven year old Naruto asking that exact same question. "It's to help you to develop your sword work and especially your attacks without worrying too much about footwork yet. All you have to do is hit me once or make me step out of the circle."

"Oh is that all?" It *sounded* easy especially given that she had the sharingan. But despite that it was proving impossible to get through Kushina's defenses even once. Kushina was very fast and expert at reading her opponents movements which limited the sharingan's advantage. Still Gabrella got ready to try again. She was just beginning to learn the sword and was enjoying it even with the frustration. Before she could begin though their radios came to life.

"Kushina this is Kakashi do you copy?"

Kushina's team and Kakashi's naturally used different frequencies. But since the attack they had let each other know what they would be using in case of any sort of emergency. Kushina understood that Kakashi calling her was a bad sign. "This is Kushina. What's wrong?" Maybe she was being pessimistic.

"It looks like Itachi is back in town and he's attacking Naruto at the park. I've alerted the ANBU and am heading there now."

Her blood ran cold. Itachi! "I'll meet you there!" Haku had been practicing senbons and was now standing in front of her with Gabrella. "The two of you stay here."

"But..." Gabrella tried to argue.

"Both of you stay here and if you follow me I swear I'll put you in the circle again." Gabrella grimaced as Kushina leapt away.

After about thirty seconds Haku turned to her. "I have to go."

"What? Do you want to be in the circle?"

Haku shook his head but looked utterly determined. "I swore when I came here that I would protect and serve the Namikaze clan. And I won't lose one of my precious people while I just stand here." With that he leapt away.

She instantly leapt after him. If he was going to be in danger she was going. She just hoped the circle was easier the second time.

---

" **Shadow Clone Technique.**" In the air a hundred shadow clones came into existence. They landed and nearly all of them had pulled out their swords. Naruto had sent two of them to try and get the civilians out of danger.

Kisame pulled his massive sword from his back and the bandages on it dropped away.

Itachi cast a jutsu of his own. " **Grand Fireball Technique.**" A massive boulder of fire rocketed towards him forcing his clones to scatter.

Kisame leapt in with his sword swinging. He wiped out three clones in one swing. He was laughing. "Come on at least put up a fight!"

"Kisame," Itachi said calmly. "I've warned you not to underestimate him."

Naruto did not dare use his most powerful jutsus as he had no idea how many civilians might still be in the park. " **Wall of Wind Technique.**" A powerful and broad wind struck the two missing nins and knocked them backwards, temporarily splitting them up. Seeing his chance he quickly directed most of his clones to go after, 'Kisame.' While the rest went in after Itachi. He meanwhile quickly circled around.

His clones always used the Dance of the Sakura. Of the five dances the dance of the cherry blossoms was the most powerful and most dangerous to use. It was the only dance that was completely devoted to attacking your enemy. That fact made it the most lethal of the dances. The lack of concern for defense also made it the most dangerous to employ. But those worries didn't apply to shadow clones which made the dance perfect for them. As his clones came on Itachi was forced onto the defensive, reacting to their attacks rather than acting on his own initiative. He destroyed many of them with kunai but was still forced into the woods away from his partner and in the direction Naruto wanted.

The last four came to a halt facing Itachi who carefully eyed them. He was still looking at them when the real Naruto struck from behind, driving his sword into Itachi's back and out his chest. Itachi stiffened and looked over his shoulder to his killer; he did not look angry or hurt.

"I am sorry Itachi." Naruto said.

"That is all right Naruto-kun." Itachi replied calmly. His body suddenly seemed to waver and became black. His body split apart into a hundred pieces, and those pieces turned into ravens.

*Ah hell I'm in a genjutsu!!* Having no choice he dropped his katana and slammed his palms together. "Kai!" But the ravens were still flying around him. He slammed his palms together again. "Kai!!" He



screamed desperate to end the genjutsu. As he continued to press his palms together his right arm began to shake. To his horror he saw his skin and clothing begin to peel away in the breeze. He began to feel the skin on the right side of his face begin to peel away. From underneath his true form came out. His face became a fox's with snapping jaw and teeth a red eye flowing wickedly. His hand became a claw and his arm became iron hard, muscled, and covered with matted red fur. He could *smell* the fox's odor.

The fox laughed. ***The seal is broken! I am free! You have failed! Now everyone will die and it will be because you were too weak!***

"No!" Naruto shouted in terror. "This is an illusion it's not real!"

Instantly the fox's arm gripped his throat and cut off his air. ***Does this feel like an illusion you fool?! You lost control and I have been set free.***

He tried to shout but he couldn't talk. With his own hand he tried to yank back the fox's but it was useless. *Kai! Kai! Kai! Damn it this isn't real!* But it seemed very real. The lack of air was real. He dropped to his knees as he tried to breathe.

---

Itachi calmly got rid of the four clones that had also fallen to their knees. He turned to look at Naruto. He seemed pathetic in his Hokage cloak kneeling in the grass as he choked himself with his own hand. Itachi was disappointed. "This was far too easy Naruto-kun. You should have been much stronger."

From behind him he heard movement. He turned to see one more clone coming at him. It was one of the clones that had been sent off earlier and was not caught in the genjutsu. Not that it mattered. The clone threw a kunai at him. Itachi frowned. It was a poor effort and missed him by a foot; he did not even have to dodge. "You should have learned to control your emotions. Your panic ruined your aim." He threw a kunai and rid himself of the nuisance.

"Actually I hit what I was aiming for."

Itachi spun back around. Naruto was still kneeling in the grass. There was now a kunai lodged in his thigh and he was casting, the sudden pain had obviously been enough to snap him out of the genjutsu.

" **Blades of Wind Technique.**" As before the air in front of Naruto solidified. But this time rather than forming a solid front it became a number of curved semi circles rather like the blades of a scythe. All at once they moved towards Itachi.

Blades made of wind could not be blocked by a sword or kunai, they could only be dodged. For an ordinary ninja it would have been impossible to avoid all those unseen attacks. But for someone who could see chakra and who possessed incredible physical ability it was possible. Itachi leapt and darted and was just able to avoid being touched by any of them. But by the time the jutsu dissipated he was about thirty yards away and Naruto had already cast another jutsu. All about him a thick and obscuring mist began to rise.

"I know for a fact that the sharingan can't see through fog." Naruto called out.

Itachi nodded. "That is true Naruto-kun. Will you use this jutsu to escape?"

A very nasty laugh and a sudden sharp killer intent were the reply. "Escape? You're not going to be that lucky. I don't run away." Wincing he finally pulled the kunai out of his leg. He also got rid of the Hokage cloak. The black and red bodysuit underneath was better suited to life and death combat. "You shouldn't have come back to this village Itachi and you shouldn't have come after me. I'm going to kill you today."

Hearing the words and feeling the intensity of his intent to carry them out Itachi's lips began to quiver ever so slightly. *This might be challenging after all.*

---

"I'm going to kill you today."

Hearing the words Kakashi shook his head. "Damn it Naruto there's no shame in retreating. We're ninjas not berserkers." Naruto had been taught that of course. Clearly when this was over he would need a refresher course. The entire park was covered with a dense fog. With a kunai he sliced his thumb and performed some hand signs. " **Summoning Technique.**"

Pakkun appeared. "Kakashi what's up?"

"Itachi is attacking Naruto I need you to bring me to him, preferably without running into Itachi first."

"Got it," Pakkun replied. "Stay close to me or we may get separated in this stuff."

---

Kushina arrived at the southern edge of the park. She had switched frequencies and was listening to Naruto threaten an S-rank missing nin with the most powerful version of the sharingan.

"Naruto-kun a tactical withdrawal is *not* the same as running away." If she could have she'd have told him to pull back and wait for help but his radio communicator remained in the send position. So instead she looked at the thick fog in front of her and tried to guess the best place to start looking for him. As she did so two figures landed on either side of her. "What are you two doing here?" She demanded sharply.

"Kushina-sama, I swore to protect the Namikaze clan. Even if I am punished for it I will not go back on my oath. And in truth knowing Naruto is in danger I want to help him no matter what."

Kushina frowned at him and then turned to Gabrella. "And what is your excuse?"

Gabrella shrugged. "I couldn't let Haku go by himself." She sent him a grin. "He might have gotten lost."

Kushina sighed and shook her head. "I assume that if I tell you to both wait here you'll ignore than order too?"

"Yes." Haku said simply and Gabrella nodded in support of his answer.

"All right, since you're both determined to be stupid and insubordinate today we'll go in as a team. But understand I *will* be punishing you for this later." Gabrella felt her heart sink. "Can you see through this mist?"

Gabrella shook her head. "I'm sorry."

"It can't be helped. All right stay close to me and keep very alert. We'll try not to just bump into Itachi." As a unit Team Kushina went into the park.

---

Given their abilities it had not been hard for Kiba and Hinata to join up before reaching the western edge of the park. The fog was not a problem for them Hinata's byakugan was already active. Since they could hear him talking they knew he was still fighting Itachi.

"Do you see him?" Kiba asked.

"Yes! And I see Itachi and Kakashi-sensei too! Sensei will reach Naruto-kun first. Come on let's hurry!" Together they headed straight for Naruto. It never even occurred to them to wait.

---

Kisame finished off the last of the clones. He had a huge smile on his face. "Now that was a good work out!" He was also amused to have taken a few minor cuts while fighting of about seventy shadow clones. He recognized the jutsu of course and wondered how a leaf

nin had learned it. Chuckling he set off to try and find his partner in this mess.

---

As all the different groups converged things were about to get interesting.

## Hit the target

Despite some pain he stood up. The wound on his leg was already healing. In a few minutes it would be gone without even a scar. Naruto was faced with a problem. That was how to get angry. Or to be more specific, how to get angry enough to summon the red chakra. He already felt plenty of anger and felt massive amounts of extra chakra available for casting jutsus. But if he was going to kill someone as strong as Itachi he wanted all the power possible. The problem was he couldn't tap into the red chakra except when he was furiously angry. And it seemed that merely being threatened with capture and eventual death wasn't enough to make him *that* angry. He chuckled sourly; he'd been worried something like this would happen eventually. When he had last had a, 'conversation' with the bastard fox he'd wanted to ask if he could somehow just summon the red chakra without the extreme anger. But he'd been dismissed before he could ask.

"Baka fox," he muttered. *Fine I'll just do this with my own chakra.* He rubbed some of the blood from his wound on his katana, wiped it, and put back in its scabbard. He then created thirty shadow clones.

From a distance Itachi called to him through the fog. "That will not work."

Naruto was not surprised that someone of Itachi's ability would be able to sense the clones even without seeing them. "No it probably won't, but it's a start until I can come up with something better." The clones drew out their swords and got moving. As they went he thought about his available jutsus and just how he was going to beat Itachi. He was a close combat specialist, and Itachi with his sharingan was a hell of a target to try and take down. The single most impressive thing he had ever seen any ninja do had been when Itachi had stopped one of his mother's attacks with nothing but his bare hand. Recalling that now he began to get an idea.

He frowned as the memories of several of his clones came to him. Itachi had brought a sword with him and was using it quite well. With his sword and kunai the clones wouldn't last long. He was also surprised to feel a familiar chakra signature approach.

"Is that you niisan?" He finally switched his radio communicator to receive.

"Naruto? Can you hear me?" Kakashi's voice came over.

"Hai."

"I'll be right there, hold in place for just a moment." Kakashi said.

"Naruto-kun are you all right?" Both his mother and Hinata said the exact same words right on top of one another. He quickly assured them both he was fine.

"Hinata where are you and is Kiba with you?" Kakashi asked over the line.

"Hai Kakashi-sensei. Kiba and I are approaching Naruto from the west we should reach him just after you do." Hinata said.

"Hinata," Naruto suddenly said. "Can you and Kiba stop maybe a couple hundred yards behind Itachi and wait there?"

"Naruto-kun," Hinata's unhappy voice said. "You promised no to try and protect me."

Naruto sighed. "I remember Hinata-chan. I'm not trying to protect you, since the whole team is here I have a plan."

Kakashi and Pakkun finally reached him. "What sort of plan?"

Wasting no time he quickly outlined his idea. "If we work together I think we can do this."

Kakashi thought about it. "Are you sure you have enough chakra to use both?"

Naruto smiled. "Kakashi-niisan I have chakra to burn."

"The timing has to be absolutely perfect or else his reaction will be different from what we need." Kakashi pointed out.

"I know, but I think we can do this." Naruto looked a bit worried. "I only have a few clones left fighting him. We need to do this or come up with something else in a real hurry."

Kakashi thought about it. It wasn't actually a bad plan and *might* work so long as their timing was perfect. "All right, Kiba and Hinata did you both here all that?"

"Yes," they both chimed in.

"Then get in position and tell me when you're ready."

---

"Oh mom! I almost forgot. Itachi came here with a partner. He's got blue skin and carried a huge sword. Itachi called him, 'Kisame.'"

"Hoshigake Kisame." Haku said with certainty.

"You know him?" Kushina asked.

Haku nodded. "He was an associate of Zabuza-sama's; I would never call him a friend. He is extremely powerful and has a massive chakra reserve. He wields a special sword called, 'Samehada.' It shaves rather than cuts. He is extremely dangerous."

A laugh came out of the fog. "Ah, it's good to be so famous. Is that you Haku?" Everyone in Team Kushina drew out their weapons as a figure approached them and became visible out of the mist. "Well I see it is. So where's Zabuza and why is he hiding out in the leaf village?"



"Zabuza-sama is dead." Haku said quietly. "I was invited here and have become a ninja of the Leaf."

"So Zabuza's dead huh?" Kisame shrugged. "Well I never thought he was going to die of old age. Listen Haku why don't you come with me? I could use a powerful apprentice. And one day you could be a full member of the organization I serve."

"I thank you for the offer Kisame-san. However I have found my place." He looked at Kushina. "And people who I care for." He sent Gabrella a side long glance.

Kisame shrugged. "Suit yourself kid."

"If you're here with Itachi then I am going to have to stop you." Kushina said.

Kisame eyed her carefully. "Nice sword, and the way you're holding it I can tell you know how to use it. So who are you?"

"I am Namikaze Kushina."

"Never heard of you." Kisame grinned. "I'm guessing you must be related to Namikaze Naruto."

"I'm his mother."

"Really? Then I guess you'd probably object to the fact I intend to take your boy and gut him like a fish."

Kushina actually stared at him for a second not believing what he had just said to her.

"You did not just say that." Gabrella muttered to herself.

Kushina's killer intent suddenly filled the air. She moved like a blur and Kisame just got his sword up in time to keep hers from cutting his neck. "I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!!!"

---

"We are in position." Hinata's voice came through.

"He just took out the last clone." Naruto said.

"All right," Kakashi spoke. "Hinata, Kiba, begin." Kakashi meanwhile began focusing chakra onto his right hand. "Again for this to work the timing will have to be perfect."

"I know." Naruto held out his right palm and chakra began to swirl about.

---

With the last clone gone Itachi was not surprised to hear movement coming from behind or to sense a pair of new chakra signatures. He turned about.

" **Fang Over Fang Technique.**" Two spiraling masses came at him. With his speed he was able to dodge them without effort.

That was when a young Hyuga girl came at him using her clan's gentle fist technique.

"You are Hinata I believe." Itachi said calmly. "The clan heir?"

"That's right." She came at him without fear. "Don't bother with your genjutsu. They won't affect me so long as my byakugan remains active. And Kiba is tracking you by scent not sight." She hadn't managed to hit him once yet. Being able to read her movements he was able to stay a step ahead. Meanwhile from behind Kiba and Akamaru made another attack run.

"That was well thought out, but still futile." He leapt back and began casting. " **Dragon Fire Technique.**" Out of his mouth a mass of flames spouted down towards her.

On instinct she worked the technique she had only recently gotten down. She worked her rotation and the flames were scattered about. Kiba and Akamaru were forced to dodge to avoid the flames.

Itachi landed and was unaware that the **real** attack was about to begin. From the fog he heard a sound like birds chirping.

" **Chidori.**" From his left Kakashi burst out of the mist.

" **Rasengan.**" From his right came Naruto. Their timing was perfect and they both reached him at the exact same moment.

---

Kisame laughed. She had forced him back several steps, her attack was ferocious. "You're a fifth level master of blades. I'm impressed." Swinging Samehada back he swung down with all his might. Kushina blocked it with her katana but the sheer force of the blow caught her head on and was too much. She was thrown to the ground. Kisame drew his sword back ready to start shaving.

" **Grand Fireball Technique.**" Gabrella shot out a large boulder of flame. Kisame was forced to leap backwards. As he did so he faced a shower of senbons. Most he warded off with his large blade, a few got through.

When Kisame landed Haku cast a special jutsu. " **Secret Art of Water Ice Crystal Magic Mirror Technique.**" The air around him began to solidify into a number of ice mirrors. Haku quickly entered on of them and his image appeared through out.

"Please surrender Kisame-san as I have no wish to kill you."

Kisame laughed. "Don't get cocky kid." He began forming hand signs. " **Exploding Water Shockwave Technique.**" The ground beneath his feet split open and water began to pour out. "I'll be able to use all my jutsus while I don't think your precious senbons will have the same punch going through water." Almost immediately the water was up to his chest and still rising. The small amount of chakra that was spread out between all the mirrors was enough to keep the water from spilling out. This had the effect of filling the dome that much faster.

"That is true Kisame-san, my senbons will be rendered useless. But you have forgoteen one thing."

The water had filled up the entire dome in well under a minute. Being underwater Kisame could not talk but he sent the images of Haku a smug smile which clearly meant, 'oh yeah, what?'

"I have a kekkei genkai." Haku said. "One that allows me to make ice." With that he flash froze all the water within the dome.

He stepped out of the ice mirrors and dispelled them. In the middle of Konoha Park on a hot summer day was a twenty foot tall dome of water with a mist nin frozen in the very middle.

"Well done Haku." Kushina said looking very impressed.

"Thank you Kushina-sama."

"Haku?" Gabrella asked.

"Yes?"

She smiled at him. "Want to go ice skating later?"

He stared at her not sure if she was serious. All around them the mist was lifting.

---

Their attack could not have been timed better. Even so using his sharingan he was able to track both attacks as they came in. And as he had done four years before with Kushina his hand snapped out and stopped the attack by grabbing his opponent by the wrist. He had stopped both Naruto and Kakashi before they could reach him.

"That was a truly excellent attempt." Itachi complimented them. "But you still failed to strike your target."

Smiling savagely Naruto curled his left hand into a fist and quickly focused all the chakra he could into it. He was wanting to go for

Itachi's head but was being held out too far away to reach it. So he hit Itachi's shoulder instead.

Itachi saw what was coming but could not dodge without releasing a chidori or rasengan to strike him. He screamed out in pain as his shoulder exploded in a shower of blood and meat. His right arm continued to grip Naruto's wrist even though it was no longer attached to his body. He forcefully threw Kakashi down and with a single hand performed a shunshin and disappeared.

"Damn it," Kakashi growled. "Knowing Itachi we'll never catch him now."

Naruto was feeling a bit grossed out as he had to *pry* Itachi's fingers loose. He went ahead and ended the mist jutsu. "That's too bad. I guess I'll have to kill him the next time I see him."

Kakashi frowned as Kiba and Hinata came over to make sure he was all right. "Naruto, you only beat him today because you had us to help. Next time you might be on your own."

"I know that niisan." Naruto nodded. "That's why I am going to get a lot stronger."

---

"Ewww!!" Gabrella said and Hinata nodded in agreement. "I can't believe that's cousin Itachi's arm!"

"It would have been his head if I could have managed it." Naruto said flatly. He was eying her without enthusiasm.

Kushina sighed. "Son Gabrella is not Itachi or Sasuke or Fugaku. She is her own person and I have come to think very highly of her."

She smiled widely. "Thank you sensei."

Kushina smiled back. "Your welcome dear, but just so you know you and Haku are still getting punished for what you did."

"WHAT?!" she shouted. "But we stopped that Kisame guy! It was a good thing that we came!"

"Oh I agree. But if I *don't* punish you then you will start thinking my orders are voluntary and they're not. *This* time things worked out. Next time ignoring my orders might be a disaster. When I give you an order it's not a request and I expect to be obeyed."

Gabrella sighed. "So you're really going to make me and Haku go in the circle?"

Kushina looked at her. "Yes but you'll only have to stay for six hours." Gabrella looked immensely relieved while Haku was calmly accepting. "We can do that tomorrow. Why don't we all get something to eat?" She looked at her son. "And I mean all of us; it'll give everyone a chance to get to know each other."

Still not looking very eager Naruto nodded, he knew his mother really wanted him to. And suddenly he stopped nodding. "Oh hell!" He began running.

"Naruto!" Kakashi called after him.

---

She was standing there outside the park entrance just as he'd told her to. He ran up to her and immediately gave her a hug. "Ah I'm so sorry imouto-chan are you all right?"

Alysa blushed a great deal and nodded. "I'm fine niisan it wasn't that long." She saw that his cloak was gone and the clothes he had on were torn and dirty. "Are you all right niisan?"

He smiled at his new little sister happily. "Never better." He pulled her up back on his shoulders again.

"Eek!"

Naruto relaxed and laughed. "Come on imouto-chan lets have lunch with mom and Haku and some people you haven't met yet."

"Don't you have to meet with your team to practice niisan?"

He shook his head. "My team is among the people you'll be meeting, and I think I've had my workout for the day."

## Broken things

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Tsunade asked quietly.

Naruto nodded. "Of course, I mean I have to know what he wants to tell me." Naruto chuckled dryly. "Besides how often do you get an invitation from a dead man?"

Tsunade shook her head. "You have a very weird way of looking at things Naruto." She nodded to Ibiki. "Let's get this over with."

"Hai Hokage-sama." Ibiki pressed a button and the elevator doors shut. He pressed another and they began to move downward into the earth. The three of them were silent.

Naruto had never been to ANBU headquarters before. The reason he was there now was certainly an unusual one. You might say he was there by invitation; just not one from the ANBU. He looked at the red signal lights as they flashed the different levels. The lights flashed until they came up on the very last one, B-5 sublevel five, also called the 'hole.' This was where the ANBU kept the absolute most dangerous prisoners.

The elevator doors opened to a small barracks. Four ANBU were standing at attention as he, Ibiki, and Tsunade stepped off. At the other end of the barracks was a thick steel door with a heavy lock. Next to the door was a large desk with six monitors mounted on the wall. On the desk was a single red button underneath a glass case. A man sat in the chair at the desk looking at the monitors. Naruto took a quick look.

"You don't have any guards patrolling the hall?" He asked Ibiki who shook his head.

"No, we don't want to risk a hostage situation." Ibiki nodded to the monitors. "If we see any sign of trouble we press the button."



"The button's a general alarm?" Naruto asked.

"No, it activates a contingency plan."

Naruto waited but Ibiki didn't elaborate. "All right I give, what does the big red button do?"

Ibiki opened the armored door. "It fills the hall and cells with cyanide gas, which is lethal within five seconds."

Naruto paled a little. "Good thing to know you won't use something like that with the Hokage down here." Ibiki and Tsunade both looked at him. Naruto got a bad feeling but decided not to say anything else.

Once they entered the hall the metal door was shut and locked behind them. Walking down the dark hall they stopped at cell door 512. Taking out a key Ibiki opened it up. Inside was a bare ten foot by ten foot room with a cot, a sink, and a toilet. And oh yeah a prisoner bound tight in shackles and iron chains. He was sitting on the floor as leisurely as his circumstance would allow. He was actually smiling.

"Company how lovely! You will excuse the mess I hope? I'd have cleaned up if I had known you were coming."

Naruto took one step into the cell. He looked relaxed but was ready to use a jutsu if the prisoner tried anything at all. "You asked to talk to me. Well here I am."

He chuckled. "Here you are, I am honored."

"If you are just wanting to joke we will leave right now." Tsunade snapped. "Unlike you Naruto actually has things to do."

"You have been tried in absentia and condemned to death. You are a dead man awaiting execution. In a few hours you will be taken to your Mist ANBU escort and begin the journey back to your home village." Ibiki reminded him.

Kisame laughed. "Yeah, I always wanted to see the village hidden in the mist again. But under different circumstances. They'll probably have my execution in the stadium and sell tickets to it."

"In any case you only have a few hours until you depart." Ibiki said. "Do you wish to use that time productively or waste it?"

He laughed a bit rudely this time. "Oh I'd love to put my time to a more *productive* use. Though I doubt the young ladies of this village would approve."

Naruto sent him a disgusted look and turned to leave. "What a waste of time. Have a good execution."

"Nice ring."

Naruto froze. Slowly he turned back around. On the ring finger of his right hand he had a ring with the etched symbol of the vermillion bird. "Thanks, Itachi didn't say anything when I took it. Spoils of battle you know."

Kisame chuckled. "You really took his arm didn't you?"

"Yeah I did. But I had plenty of help from my team."

Kisame shook his head. "Unless you had a Sannin helping you it's still amazing." Kisame looked Naruto over carefully. "Itachi thought you would be a very difficult opponent, me not so much. I guess he knew better. You've got guts kid and you've talent, if you didn't have the Kyuubi stuck inside you we might try to recruit you."

"No thanks, I can't be Hokage if I'm a missing nin."

"Is that your goal kid to be Hokage?"

Naruto nodded carefully. "My dream is to be the greatest Hokage my village has ever known."

"Well that's too bad." Kisame smiled. "Unless the lady standing there decides to retire early or croaks I don't think you're going to get there."

"Watch your mouth." Tsunade said menacingly.

"Hey! I'm just trying to give the kid some good advice since he's earned my respect by facing down Itachi." He looked at Naruto again. "The message I wanted to give you kid is really simple; have fun."

Naruto stared back at him wondering what sort of joke this was. "Have fun? That's what I came all the way down here for?"

Kisame nodded. "That's right. Eat candy, play with puppies, kiss girls, slaughter your enemies; you know... fun. Try and really enjoy life as much as you can. Since you don't have more than three years."

Naruto frowned at the man bound up in chains. "You know you're not in a very good position to make threats."

Kisame laughed. "Oh I won't be the one who kills you. You'll outlive me for sure. But my organization is powerful and committed and we will **never** let you go. So long as Akatsuki functions you will be our prey and we will hunt you down and take what is inside of you. You have three years kid, at most, so enjoy what time you've got."

"Why three years?" Naruto asked.

"Honestly? I have no freaking idea, I just know that there's a time limit and that's it."

"So a bunch of criminals want me dead?" Naruto shrugged. "Well thanks for the warning."

"Naruto," Tsunade sounded worried. "Don't take this lightly! We have a list of their members now thanks to our interrogations. They are all

A or S rank missing nins and their leader, this so called Pain, sounds like he is Sannin level."

Naruto looked at his godmother in surprise. "Sannin?"

"Listen to her kid. Pain recruited Itachi by beating him, and from what Itachi told me it wasn't even a contest."

"This leader of yours was *that* much stronger than Itachi?" Naruto looked and sounded just a little nervous.

"That's right." Kisame stated. "And that's who will never let you go no matter what. Pain *is* the Akatsuki and he is determined to have the nine tails whatever the cost."

"I see." Naruto said calmly. "It sounds like I'm going to have to kill this Pain or else he is going to kill me."

Kisame nodded. "That's about what it comes down to."

Naruto slowly nodded. "Thank you, that's actually good information to have. Was there anything else?"

"Nope, just make sure to enjoy yourself before the end."

Naruto nodded and exited the cell. Ibiki shut and locked the door and soon the three of them were walking up the hall again.

"You know Naruto if you'd like to take some time off of active duty all you have to do is ask." Tsunade said quietly.

But Naruto just shook his head. "No way, I'm a Jonin not a scared kid. I'm not going to run away and hide."

Tsunade sighed. She hated it, but after the losses from the battle she really couldn't spare him. The village needed him. Sometimes she really hated being Hokage.

They really didn't say much as they left ANBU headquarters. Tsunade had her worries and Naruto had his. *I have to get stronger.*

---

He grunted in pain. Looking down at his bandaged arms he seethed. "Curse you third lord, may you rot in hell." He glared up at the medic nin standing by his bedside. He was one of two other people in the room. "It didn't work you incompetent idiot. Why didn't it work?"

The medic paled beneath that hateful glare. "My lord, the truth is I do not know why the procedure failed. By all rights amputating the arms and replacing them should have healed the injury. But almost as soon as the new arms were attached they began to blacken and deteriorate."

"I can see that!" Orochimaru bellowed. "What I want to know is how can this be repaired?"

The medic nin swallowed. "My lord I have no jutsu or medical procedure that could cure this malignancy. The only person who might possibly have a solution would be the great Tsunade."

Orochimaru's neck extended and fangs came out. He tore out the man's throat. Spraying him and the bed sheets in blood as the poor fellow collapsed and flailed about as he died.

"Fool! Do you think I could go up to her and ask her for help?!" Orochimaru clamped down. Yelling at a corpse on the floor wouldn't do any good. He should yell at someone who was still alive. "Karin! Come here!"

Pale and nervous she carefully stepped around the body to stand before her blood splattered master. "Yes Lord?"

"I want you to repair my arms." Orochimaru demanded like a petulant child.

Karin swallowed and tried not to notice that she was standing in a pool of warm blood. "My Lord," she spoke carefully and very politely. "I am not a medic nin, I am a researcher and scientist. Perhaps if you were to recall Kabuto?"

"Kabuto has his own mission to complete; besides he gave me the same advice as this fool. He also said that only Tsunade could possibly know of a way to heal me."

"Then my lord, why did you kill him just now?"

He gave her a look that made her feel the same sort of blind terror her test subjects felt. "Because I am sick of hearing it cannot be done! I recently took this body and I cannot leave it for *three years!* I am *not* staying in this condition for years. You are my most brilliant research scientist. If a jutsu cannot help me then I shall have to depend on science." He leaned forward in his bed and she could see rage in his eyes. "Can you do it?"

*If I say no he'll kill me.* She slowly nodded. "It may be possible lord. But science requires data and experimentation as you well know."

Orochimaru frowned but did not snap at her. "How much time would you need?"

*How long can I ask for without him going crazy?* "Six months?" She said timidly.

He frowned at her. "I will give you three. You can have three months to fix my arms." He gave her a sliver of a grin. "If you do it I'll give any reward you want, anything. But if you fail me Karin, I'll make you scream and scream and scream. Do you understand?"

She nodded dumbly. "I understand lord."

"Then go and get started, and send someone to clean up this mess." Orochimaru leaned back into his bed.

"Yes lord." She bowed and got out of the room as quick as she could.

---

She walked down the hall looking calm and composed. Inside she was trying to hold down her sense of panic. *There is no way I can heal his arms! I don't even know where to start. He's like the world's most lethal spoiled child. He wants what he wants and if he doesn't get it he kills you.* She had absolutely no real loyalty to Orochimaru, she was no Kabuto. She loved science and the chance to create things never before seen. She had joined his organization for the chance to do some *real* research without any stupid morals or ethics to hamper her. Her time with Orochimaru had actually been a wonderful experience with many great things accomplished. But though she had willingly slaughtered hundreds of test subjects in her experiments that didn't mean she was eager to die herself. *I have three months to get myself out of this. I know I can't cure him. If I try and run he'll send ninjas after me to kill me. So what the hell does that leave?* She had a sharp mind. She swiftly came up with a third option. It was almost as dangerous as the other two, but she judged it her best alternative. It was her best chance to live more than three months.

---

"How does it feel?" Kakuzu asked.

Itachi carefully made a fist with his new arm. "It feels just a little weak."

"That is normal in a few days you won't be able to tell the difference."

Itachi gave his fellow Akatsuki member a formal bow. "You have my thanks."

Kakuzu chuckled. "I'll send you a bill." He half joked.

"What went wrong?" Pain asked curiously.

"Naruto proved stronger than I expected. He was able to hold us off until help arrived."

Pain frowned slightly. "It's not like you to fail Itachi."

"This is a temporary setback, nothing more." Itachi paused for a bit. "Is the deadline still the same?"

"Of course," Pain replied. "That has never changed."

"Even though the one tail is dead?"

Pain nodded sharply. "The weapon can be reconfigured to use the chakra of the eight remaining biju. Everything remains within reach. Everything remains on schedule. We *will* succeed." He looked at Itachi coldly. "You have failed your mission and even lost your ring. You will have only one more opportunity."

"May I choose when I make my final attempt?" Itachi asked calmly.

Pain nodded. "So long as it is within the time limit."

"What of Kisame?"

Pain frowned. "He was captured and revealed our secrets to the leaf nins. He is no longer a member of this organization."

Itachi nodded. "I see."

---

Whack! *Hero*. Whack! *Jonin*. Whack! *Demon of the Leaf*. Whack! *The one who took Itachi's arm off*. WHACK! *The next Hokage?* WHACK! WHACK! WHACK!

"Stop or I'll tell everyone you're abusing that poor tree." A girl's voice called to him.

Panting Sasuke stopped hitting the tree with his fist. His knuckles were bloody but he hadn't noticed. He sent his cousin a hard look.



"What do you want? Shouldn't you be training with your precious sensei?"

"I already did my training with my squad and an extra hour's worth with my dad. Your mom sent me to get you. It's time for dinner." Gabrella stated.

"I'm not hungry." He turned back to the tree.

"Oh come on Sasuke! How will you be able to teach all these trees a lesson without a healthy meal?"

Sasuke turned around again and glared at his older cousin. "Is all this a joke to you?"

"If by, 'all this' you mean that stick that's shoved all the way your ass then yeah, it's a joke. What the hell is wrong with you? Ever since Itachi came back you've been even more of a jerk than usual."

"Well what do you expect?" Sasuke barked at her. "He came back here to go after Naruto and Naruto actually beat him and took his arm." Sasuke clenched his fists in frustration.

"So?"

"What? What do you mean so?"

Gabrella shook her head. "Would you have been happier if he'd killed Naruto or captured him instead?"

Sasuke honestly didn't know. He hated Naruto and wanted to be the one to save the village from him. But if Itachi did it the village would be saved, but wouldn't that make Itachi a hero? "No," Sasuke finally said. "But he killed our father and I should be the one to kill him and avenger father. And if Itachi were in the village he should have come after me instead."

"Oh I see, I guess Naruto should have just lain down and waited for you to come to his rescue." Gabrella sent him a harsh look of her

own. "Get over it Sasuke! Naruto is a powerful ninja! Deal with it already! You don't like him, I get that. But you're starting to go way past rivalry. I'm really starting to think you'd like to kill him."

And she saw it. Just for a second. A look of bliss crossed his face. It was gone in an instant, but it had been there.

"Of course I wouldn't! He's a comrade! I'm just upset that he did something I wanted to." He suddenly gave her a little grin. "Come on, I think I am hungry after all."

"Sure." Gabrella slowly nodded.

---

Tsunade smiled at the five Genin she had hand selected to give some instruction to. They were all young and had talent. She was sure they would do very well. Her one regret was that her duties as Hokage would keep her from spending as much time with them as she would have liked. She saw two of them were having an animated discussion. Kabuto and Noval were best friends and would no doubt push each other to become excellent medic nins. Neji seemed relaxed and calm ready to do his best. Beside him was Hinata her apprentice and assistant. Hinata was already much further along than anyone else. She would actually help with teaching the others. If time allowed she would give Hinata some one on one training later. And then there was her last selection.

"Thank you so much for this opportunity Hokage-sama!" Sakura said eagerly.

Tsunade nodded. "Well a former student of mine recommended you for this. Uchiha Ichala isn't one for just handing out compliments, but she was raving about your skill level. So I just had to see for myself."

"Ichala-sensei said that? Sensei raved about me?" Sakura sounded very happy.

Knowing Ichala Tsunade could understand why. "She certainly did."

Looking at the five of them she was eager to get started.

The door to the classroom opened and in charged Shizune. "Lady Tsunade! We have just received this!" She hurried over to the Hokage waving a single sheet of paper about.

Tsunade took the paper from her and read through it. She paled. She looked nervously over to her apprentice. "Hinata?"

"Yes Hokage-sama?" She answered.

"I have something I have to take care of. Could you take over the class?"

Hinata looked a bit nervous but nodded. "Hai Hokage-sama."

"Thank you Hinata." She left the classroom to return to the tower. She glanced at the report again. Once more she found herself hating her duty as Hokage.

# Legacy of the Uzumaki

"You look so pretty niisan!" Alysa said happily.

Naruto managed a very weak smile. Growing up he had always wanted siblings. Brothers and sisters to play with and hang out with. When he'd suddenly had Alysa added to the family he'd been very happy and welcomed his new imouto with open arms. He was still very happy to have her in the family. It was kind of sweet the way she looked up to him and tried to get him to play with her. But he was discovering that having a little sister could have some draw backs.

"Well thank you Alysa-chan. But you know boys aren't supposed to be pretty."

Though he said it gently gloom filled her face. "Does that mean you don't like it niisan?"

He smiled at her. "Of course I like it Alysa-chan." He reached out and rubbed the top of her head. She blushed and her happy smile came back full force. *I guess this is part of what an older brother does, humiliate myself to make my imouto smile. Hmmm, I wonder if Kakashi niisan ever felt that way playing with me when I was little.* He had a sudden mental image of being four or so and riding Kakashi's back like he was a horse. *Nah! I bet he enjoyed it as much as I did.*

"Now for the pink ribbons!" Alysa said excitedly.

Naruto shut his eyes. He reminded himself that he was being a good niisan and that self image was probably overrated anyway.

---

Kushina knocked on her son's door. "Naruto-kun can I come in?"

There was a pause. "Only if you promise not to laugh." Naruto said.

"What?"

"You can only come in if you promise not to laugh mom."

"All right son I promise." He had never asked for that before. "Can I come in now?"

"Sure mom."

She opened the door and entered her son's room. "Naruto-kun the Hokage's office just called and they need..." She stopped. She looked at the scene in front of her eyes. She slapped both hands over her mouth to keep from roaring out in laughter.

"Mom you promised!" Naruto sounded upset.

"Kaasan!" Alysa chimed in. "Doesn't niisan look pretty?"

She nodded her head agreeing with both of them but kept her hands over her mouth. There sitting on the floor was her nearly thirteen year old son. He was a Jonin, a hero, and one of the most powerful ninjas in the village. Standing behind him was Alysa proudly displaying her handiwork. Somehow she had managed to get Naruto's spiky blonde hair enough under control to *braid* it. Naruto had six braids, each with a pink ribbon at the end.

Being ninja Kushina had great self control. She was finally able to take her hands away with a relatively straight face. "Oh I agree Alysa-chan, Naruto-kun is very *pretty* ." Her lips twitched a bit but she didn't laugh. Alysa looked very proud while Naruto sent his mom an unhappy look.

"I'm afraid I have to take him away from you right now. Naruto and I have been summoned to the tower." Alysa frowned upset that he was being taken from her.

Naruto rubbed her head with a smile. "Sorry Alysa-chan but I have to go."

---

"We never ever speak of this again." Naruto said as he and Kushina left. There was no time to undo his new hairstyle so Naruto was using his hitai-ite to cover the top of his head with a wrap.

Kushina gave him a wide smile. "Let's go honey."

Naruto gave her a very worried look. "Mom! I want you to promise you'll never mention this!"

She chuckled. "Oh I'll just bet you do."

"Mooooooooom!" Naruto whined.

---

"Thank you for coming." Tsunade said solemnly.

Kushina eyed her carefully. "What's wrong?"

"I have an A-rank retrieval mission for the two of you."

Kushina raised an eyebrow. "Just me and Naruto? Or do you mean just our two teams?"

"I mean just you two." Tsunade took a deep breath. "The request is from Uzumaki Saishu." Kushina's back stiffened.

"Uzumaki?" Naruto sent a confused look to his mother and then to his Hokage.

Kushina sent her son a smile. "Naruto-kun could you give the Hokage and me just a minute alone please?"

"Kushina," Tsunade said unhappily. "He has a right to know, he is an adult."

Kushina wore a stern look. "He has *no* reason to know about him."

"Mom, Hokage-sama, who is he?" Naruto asked.

"Do you want to tell him or should I?" Tsunade asked.

Frowning Kushina looked at her son. "Technically he is my uncle. So technically he would be your grand uncle Naruto-kun."

"I have a grand uncle?" Naruto said excitedly. "Mom why didn't you ever tell me about him? You said I didn't have any relatives on either side of the family."

"It's... complicated Naruto."

Naruto frowned and crossed his arms. "What do you mean it's complicated? If he's family why haven't you ever told me about him?"

"Because he is *not* family Naruto-kun. That's why I never mentioned him." She turned to Tsunade. "You should have spoken to me about this in private. Whatever he wants the answer is no! He made his choice a long time ago."

Tsunade looked at her friend sadly and handed her the report. "Please read this."

Kushina took it and read. As she did so her anger softened just a bit. "I see... so he's dying."

"He's dying?" Naruto said in surprise and sudden disappointment. "Mom we have to go see him then."

"No," Kushina said flatly and laid the report down on the desk. "We are not going and that is final." Naruto grabbed the report off the desk. "Naruto!"

"Let him read it." Tsunade commanded. "He can decide for himself if he wants to go."

"What?" Kushina said sharply.

Tsunade gave her old friend a neutral expression. She didn't speak to her as a friend or as Naruto's godmother. She spoke as Hokage.

"If you want to refuse this assignment you have that right, this is not an S-rank. But Naruto can accept it if he wishes to."

"You are *not* sending him out there alone!"

"The mission request was very specific. Saishu asked that no one but the two of you be sent. And given the location a small inconspicuous force would be best. Drawing the wrong sort of attention would be disastrous."

"Do you know how dangerous this will be?" Kushina wanted to know.

"Why do you think I'm assigning it an A-rank?" Tsunade said. "Naruto is a Jonin. As such he would be expected to be able to handle some A-ranks solo." Tsunade hated when her duties as Hokage went against her wishes as a friend and godmother. Whatever Kushina thought this was a worthwhile mission. She couldn't sweep it under the rug simply because of Kushina's feelings or because of concern for Naruto's safety.

"What does he mean the retrieval object is the, 'legacy of the Uzumaki clan?'" Naruto asked.

Tsunade shrugged. "I have no idea. I would presume it to be some heirloom, your mother likely knows."

Kushina frowned. "It's nothing of any great value. Certainly nothing worth the risk."

Naruto looked at the Hokage. "I'm taking the mission."

"Naruto!" Kushina said sharply.

"I'm taking the mission mom." Naruto replied firmly. "I want to meet him! And if he's really dying then I have to do this!"

Tsunade nodded. "It's a long way to Whirlpool country. Be ready to leave by 6 a.m. tomorrow."



Naruto nodded. "Hai Hokage-sama."

Seeing that stubborn look on her son's features she knew there was no changing his mind. "All right Naruto if you're determined to go I'll come with you."

---

That night they each made calls to let various people know they would be gone for awhile; likely about two weeks.

Alysa was upset to learn her kaasan and niisan were going to be away for awhile. She would be staying with Hyugas for that time. Haku offered to be responsible for her, but he was likely to be on missions as well.

Their teams were not happy at the news. Gabrella and Hinata were especially displeased. But they could not really argue about an A-rank assignment from the Hokage. Once all the necessary calls and arrangements were made Naruto had the chance to talk to his mom again.

---

"Mom, why didn't you ever tell me I had a relative?"

Kushina sighed. "It was because I don't consider him to be family."

"You said that before, so why? What did he do?"

"It's complicated Naruto."

He frowned. "I have time mom, and I *really* want to know."

Kushina let out a very long sigh. She'd hoped to avoid this somehow. "I never told you what happened to Whirlpool country or to the Uzumaki clan."

Naruto shook his head. "All you ever said was that they were both gone."

Kushina nodded. "Whirlpool was a very small and poor country with the bad luck of being stuck between the lands of earth and waterfall. Whirlpool was basically a city state centered on a ninja village on the coast. The weather was always wet and cold and the land was poor both in minerals and agriculture. And even though it was poor the damn rock nins were forever threatening us. We raised sheep, fished, and provided ninjas; and somehow we managed. It was a hard land and we were a hard people." She smiled fondly for a bit. "I loved it though, it was home."

Naruto nodded and listened to every word.

"The Uzumakis were one of the founding clans of Whirlpool country. We were never rich, but we were respected for the high quality of our swordsmanship and ninja. For as long as there had been an Uzumaki clan we had led the fight to protect and provide for our home by the sea." She sighed sadly. "Then the Kyuubi came."

"The Kyuubi?" Naruto said. "The Kyuubi attacked the village hidden in the whirlpool?"

She shook her head. "Not directly, it never came near Whirlpool. But its power was such that every strike of its tail could flatten a mountain or make the earthy shake. When the Kyuubi came the land was wracked by natural disasters. Even lands the Kyuubi never visited suffered. A terrible earthquake struck the village and most of it fell into the sea. What little of it remained on the land was flattened and most of the people killed. In a single day the village and the country were gone. We were too few and too poor for there to be any chance of rebuilding. Most of the survivors left and the land of earth simply added the territory to its own. While this was going on I was here of course giving birth to you. The only member of my clan to survive was my uncle Saishu."

"The Kyuubi did that." Naruto said quietly.

"Naruto-kun," she kissed her son's cheek. "There's no need for that look. You already know you are not the Kyuubi."

He gave her an appreciative smile. "I know mom, thanks. So why didn't you try to contact him?"

Her green eyes flashed. "I did." She said flatly. "I didn't learn what had happened until a couple weeks later. I had just recovered from the birthing, Tsunade and Shizune had gone, and feelings in the village were still running high. I could really have used my uncle's help; not just in protecting you but just for his support and company. It would have made things much easier for me to have had family here. I wrote to him and pleaded for him to come to Konoha."

Naruto could see his mother's anger rising. "So he never wrote back?"

"Oh he wrote back all right!" Kushina said voice coldly furious. "He told me his duty was to remain in Whirlpool country and preserve the Uzumaki clan. He asked me to abandon Konoha and bring you to whirlpool."

Naruto thought about that. "Why didn't you?"

"What?" Kushina stared at him in surprise.

Naruto shrugged. "Well since so many people hated me, why didn't you leave?"

She shook her head. "Because even if *some* people hated you, you were the son of Namikaze Minato. You were Minato's legacy, the heir and future leader of Namikaze. Your destiny was always here son. And here I at least had Kakashi, Sarutobi, and the Hyugas; and occasionally Tsunade, Shizune, and Jiraiya. I had this mansion and the aid of the Hokage and the ANBU in protecting you. Against all that my uncle wanted me to take you to a shack in the middle of an empty country *infested* with rock nins. If they had even suspected you were the Minato's son they'd have sent an army out to kill or capture you." She gave Naruto a flat look. "So tell me son which way should I have gone?"

"Oh you definitely made the right choice mom."

"So glad you agree."

"So you just wrote him the one time?"

Kushina shook her head. "Son I wrote him dozens of times. I sent him pictures of you and tried to convince him that his duty was to his *living* family members. But he felt his greater duty was to remain in whirlpool to try and honor the clan's memory. Finally I gave up and stopped writing him. So far as I was concerned he'd abandoned us and was no longer family." She looked at Naruto intently. " *That's* who we're going to see Naruto, a man who cared more about the dead than the living. Still want to go?"

Without hesitation he nodded. "Yes, even if he did all that I still want to meet him and get to know him if I can." Naruto paused. "You forgave the people who hated me. Can't you forgive him too?"

Kushina planted her hands on her hips. "Those people were strangers. Saishu was *family* he had a duty not just to me but to you as well. He abandoned us and for that I can *never* forgive him."

Naruto sighed. "I still want to meet him."

Kushina shook her head defeated. "Then let's get some sleep, it's going to be a very long trip."

## The last Uzumaki

On her belly she crawled forward to the top of the hill. The thick grass provided her with good cover. It was just before dawn and the sky was beginning to lighten. Careful to avoid any sudden movements she brought the binoculars to her eyes and looked out. About a couple miles away was a small rough hewn fort. There was a wooden stockade around a few basic buildings. She saw a command post, a barracks, and what was probably an arsenal. From the size she estimated the garrison could not possibly have been more than twenty. At the very center was a flagpole, in the gusting wind she could see the symbol of the village hidden in the rocks. *This is it? They're occupying my whole country with just twenty ninjas in a wood fort.* She wasn't sure if she was more relieved or insulted. She crawled away from the crest before standing again and meeting Naruto at the base of the hill. They had been traveling five days to get here. At her insistence they had picked up a change of clothes in waterfall. They both wore spotted green and black cloaks along with greenish brown pants and tunics. She had tied up her extremely long hair into a pony tail and stuffed it down the back of her cloak so no one could see it. Naruto had picked up a light brown rag which was tied around the top of his head to hide that distinctive blonde hair. Both their hitai-ites were hidden away now, though for different reasons. Leaf ninjas were not welcome in earth territory, but there was an actual law that the whirlpool insignia could not be displayed. The idea that she was **forbidden** to display her hitai-ite in her home country made her furious, but the mission required them to be anonymous. So for the duration of their time here they would pass themselves off as common mercenaries or bandits rather than as ninja.

"The information we got looks to be correct. There's one small fort here." Kushina said quietly. "If the rest of the intel is accurate they mostly patrol the border with waterfall and don't bother much with the locals."

Naruto looked a little surprised. "That's good isn't it?" She nodded. "Then why do you look like you swallowed a lemon?"

She chuckled dryly. "Naruto, how would you feel if when we went back to Konoha you found a bunch of Sound nins acting as though they owned the place?" He tried to picture that image in his head. As soon as he did he let out a low growl. She nodded. "Let's stay vigilant, just because they don't do it regularly doesn't mean they won't send a patrol inland." She took a deep breath. "Now let's go."

"So we're finally going to meet Saishu?"

She nodded. "We will, but there's something I need to see first."

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It had never been even a third the size of Konoha. It had never been anything but a small walled village by the sea. As she looked about it was hard to be sure what anything was. *Nothing* had been left standing, not even a single wall. She would look at a pile of rubble and think it *might* have been a friend's home or a favorite restaurant, but she could not be sure. She'd been told that the old village had been abandoned, that the few remaining survivors who had not left lived in a small settlement a few miles away. As they went they disturbed some rabbits and a few gulls. The grass was growing in what had been the streets and the yards. As they walked around the rubble a light rain began to fall. She looked at her son who was walking close beside her.

"It rains here almost every single morning." She said a bit wistfully. She looked up at the grey sky and let the gentle rain wash her face. "It's always cloudy too, if you have thirty clear days in a year that's a lot. Gloomy, depressing place," she muttered.

Naruto could see she was unhappy. "Are you all right mom?"

She nodded. "Just a lot of memories." They continued to walk slowly through the debris filled street. Kushina let her eyes wander about. The destruction was so complete. What must it have been like? She

wondered if any of her old friends had survived. She had written her uncle asking and he hadn't known of a single one. As they continued to walk she spied an old broken doll lying half buried. It was just outside a pile of bricks that had been a home once. Was the child that doll belonged to buried there? She looked away knowing what the likely answer was.

Thinking about a child's death she couldn't help but remember that terrible night almost thirteen long years. She remembered facing down the council and demanding that Naruto be returned to her. What would have happened if she had woken too late or somehow been unable to save him? She knew the answer to that. She would have committed seppuku. *I couldn't have lived if I'd lost them both.* She reached out and kissed his cheek.

He gave her a surprised, but pleased, look. "What was that for?"

She grinned. "That was just because you are my son and I love you."

He got up on his toes and she bent down a bit so he could kiss her cheek as well. "I love you too mom."

They kept walking as the rain picked up a bit. They walked until they forced to an abrupt halt. The water was lapping against the ruins. She could see the jagged line in the earth where a part of the village had simply dropped in to the ocean. She went to the very edge and looked over. All she could see was the tide coming in and out. The water was dark and foamy and whatever was lying beneath the waves was deep enough to be hidden. She looked to Naruto and pointed north westward.

"The Uzumaki clan house was there about a mile and a half that way. It wasn't a mansion, but it was a big house and we had a very big yard surrounding it. We even had a few trees." She chuckled. "I know you can't imagine this, but there aren't many trees here so they seemed really special to me growing up. Sort of seemed exotic and wild."

Naruto stared at her. " *Trees* exotic and wild? Were they giant deformed trees like in the forest of death?"

She laughed and shook her head. "No, they were just some pine and maple trees, not even really very big." She looked back out at the ocean. "It was a wonderful place to grow up Naruto-kun. I had mother and father and my brothers Temjin and Urusai. I had uncles and aunts and cousins and my grandfather. I grew up surrounded by a huge family." She looked at him a bit sadly. "I was always sorry that I couldn't give that to you." She looked out at the ocean again. "We would go swimming and fishing and have picnics out in the fields. But the best thing?" She turned to smile at him. "The best thing was when dad would tell us stories! When we were kids he would come back from his missions and tell all of us a story! Me, my brothers, all my cousins; we would all gather around the fireplace and he would tell us one of these amazing tales. Some times it was about the mission he'd just completed. Sometimes it was about something a friend had done. Sometimes it was a story about one of our ancestors; but his stories were always amazing! Oh Naruto," her voice ached. "You would have loved him; you would have loved all of them! Your grandparents, your uncles, your second cousins all the family you would have gotten to meet and know. All gone now, all gone now." She looked out at the ocean again. She was staring out as though she could still see it, and in a way she could. She remembered her older brother Urusai standing in the circle with that cocky grin of his daring her to hit him just once with her wooden sword. She could remember standing in the kitchen with her mom learning how to cook. She could remember running around screaming as she played ninja with her brothers and cousins. She could remember falling asleep in front of the fire and her father gently picking her up and carrying her to her bed.

She came out of her thoughts when she felt Naruto touch her arm. "Mom are you o.k.?"

She nodded quickly. "I'm fine Naruto-kun." She wiped her eyes. "The rain gets in my eyes."



"Mom I'm so sorry you lost everything."

"I didn't." She put her arms around him and embraced him. "I lost a lot, but the most important thing I still have." She kissed his forehead and squeezed him as tight as she could. "Let's go."

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The settlement was about three miles west of the old village. Kushina was very careful to observe it undetected. Though she longed to go and see if there were any familiar faces it was too dangerous. If someone recognized her and decided to go inform the rock nins that would lead to serious trouble. Even using a henge just the report of a couple strangers appearing might be a problem. From her cover she looked things over. It was depressing to think that this was what remained of a once proud nation. There were only about two dozen structures; most of them were simple thatch huts with just a couple made of brick. They were just scattered about, there were no discernable streets or order. If there were even two hundred people present she'd have been amazed. Was this really all that was left of her country?

"Which one is his?" Naruto whispered excitedly.

"None of them," she whispered back. "We just came here to get our bearings. According to the report he lives in his own home a couple miles west of here."

"Then what are we waiting for?"

She looked at him carefully. "You're really eager to meet him aren't you?"

He nodded. "Of course!"

She sighed. "I just hope you're not too disappointed."

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The rain had stopped. He stepped out of the hut and stretched his weary body until he heard some cracking. He would go and do some fishing though he didn't really need to, he had plenty of food, but it was at least something to do. As he got his tackle box he sensed people approaching. He put the tackle box down and put a hand on the handle of his katana. Standing just outside the entrance to his hut he watched as two people approached. They were both wearing green and black camouflage style cloaks. He felt a great fear and hope rise up in his chest and the feeling seemed to double when he recognized Kushina.

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"Mom! Is that?"

She slowly nodded. "That is your grand uncle Naruto." She said without enthusiasm. "Come on let's get this over with."

She approached him with a slow steady gate. He simply stood there calmly waiting for her. Naruto was a bit confused as to what to do. His impulse was to go up and give the man a hug but he didn't know if that was the right thing to do. The man was obviously a good bit older than his mom, probably around Jiraiya's age. He had on a plain grey cloak with khaki colored tunic and pants underneath. His face was serious and his green eyes seemed to jump from him to his mom and back again. He had a full head of mostly grey hair but with a slight fringe of red in it. On his hip he carried a katana and had pouches on his belt. He was standing outside a simple thatch hut like others he had seen in the settlement.

His mom came to a halt about two paces from him and stood there. Naruto was very excited but decided to let the two of them talk first. The older man opened and closed his mouth a couple of times. Finally he took a deep breath and spoke.

"Hello Kushina."

"Uncle." She said flatly.

He opened up his arms but she did not move an inch closer. He slowly lowered them. "Still angry I see."

She nodded her head once. "You might say that."

He looked hopeful. "Well you can't be *too* angry since you did come."

But she shook her head. "I didn't want to come. I am here because Naruto would have come alone otherwise."

Saishu turned his full attention to the young man standing to Kushina's right. "Naruto," he opened his arms again. "Would you like to give your old uncle a hug?"

"Sure!" Naruto immediately went forward and shared an embrace with him. Kushina frowned but did not say anything.

After their hug Saishu took a step back. "Here now let me look at you!" He looked Naruto up and down and smiled. "You really are the absolute spitting image of your father."

Naruto grinned and rubbed the back of his head. "Gee thanks!"

"It's so good to finally see you Naruto! I have pictures of you as a baby but nothing else."

Hearing a complaint Kushina spoke sharply. "And whose fault is that? If you really wanted to see him you could have visited him any time you liked."

Saishu looked at his niece and let out a deep sigh. "I did not feel that I could leave whirlpool, you know the reasons why."

A little color filled her cheeks and her anger tipped the edges of her words. "I know, you had to stay here to honor the memory of the clan. You were worried about the dead while your living family went ignored."

"You are right." He said quietly. "I did stay here to honor our clan's memory, and perhaps I did I ignore the duty I had to you and your son in favor of the other. But I ask you to understand only that what I did I did with the best of intentions. Still, if I failed you and Naruto then I humble and sincerely apologize to both of you." With that he gave each of them a deep bow. "I ask you both to forgive me."

At his words Naruto smiled and Kushina stiffened.

"That's all right grand uncle! I forgive you, and I'm sure mom does to."

"Naruto!" Her son jumped at the sharpness in her tone. "Don't speak for me!" She focused on her uncle. "I *don't* forgive you uncle! I lost my husband and except for a very few friends I was alone in a foreign land surrounded by people who hated and wanted to harm my son! I needed you! I needed my family there to help me. You refused! You made my burden that much heavier and what was worse you denied my son your wisdom and protection. If you think that can be forgotten or forgiven with a simple apology you are very sadly mistaken."

"Mom..."

She shook her head. "We're here on a mission to retrieve an item. Go ahead and give it to us so we can be on our way."

"But mom we just got here!" Naruto argued.

"It doesn't matter. We're here for one reason only to pick up an item and bring it back to Konoha. The sooner we get it the sooner we can get back."

"Kushina," Saishu said in a firm voice. "I understand if you are angry with me or even if you hate me. But I am still your son's only living relative. Surely you can just stay a few days to give him a chance to get to know me."

She looked at him with open anger. "If you really wanted to get to know my son you could have visited him at any time. If he is a stranger to you that is your own fault."

Saishu nodded. "I won't deny that. And if I could have the years back I would do things differently. But I beg you, my brother's daughter, to allow me to do what I can with the time I have remaining."

Kushina eyed him carefully. Her uncle had never been one to lie. He obviously looked far older than she remembered and he did seem pale. "I know some medical jutsus. Would you allow me to check your condition?"

He nodded immediately. "Please do."

She approached him and performed the diagnostic jutsu then placed a single hand on his chest above his heart. One moment was enough to tell her all she needed. She pulled her hand back and looked at him. There was still anger there, but it was blunted by regret. "I am sorry uncle."

He nodded. "That's all right, I've know for awhile now." He took a very deep breath. "Kushina, I truly am sorry that I was not there for you when you needed me. But please understand that in my own way I did what I thought was right." He looked over at Naruto. "Kushina I beg you, let me have the chance to get to know your son before I die. Please allow me to do at least that much."

Naruto looked at her. "Mom please! Let's stay for just a little while!"

She shut her eyes and let out a breath. "One day." She opened here eyes and gave both of them a firm look. "We will stay one day uncle and leave early tomorrow morning."

"Just a day? Mom can't we..."

"Please don't argue on my behalf Naruto." He gave Kushina another bow. "I am truly appreciative that I am allowed even that much time

to try and set right what I can, with you and with your mother." He had a small grin. "Are you hungry?"

"A little." Kushina admitted.

"I'm starved!" Naruto said. "What is there to eat?"

Saishu smiled. "I have plenty of salted cod fish, fresh rice, and fish sauce."

Naruto blanched. "Fish sauce? Yuck!"

Saishu looked at his grand nephew in surprise. "Haven't you ever eaten rice with fish sauce before?"

Naruto shook his head energetically. "No definitely not, and I don't eat fish very often."

Saishu looked at Kushina. "You've never made him cod with rice and fish sauce?"

She actually looked just a bit embarrassed. "Konoha's not by the ocean you know."

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Naruto stayed away from the fish sauce while the two older ninjas poured it all over their rice. Nearly all the conversation over the meal was between Saishu and Naruto as they tried to make better than twelve years disappear and get to know each other. Naruto was eager to tell him about all his jutsus and how he had fought against the recent invasion. But what Saishu kept asking about was what it had been like for him growing up. He wanted to hear about Kakashi and Hinata and Shikamaru and Lee and Kiba. Kushina mostly ate in silence and listened to their conversation.

Naruto took out a picture and handed it to him. "Here."

Saishu took it and looked at it with a smile. "So this is Hinata?"

"Yes, that's my beautiful Hinata-chan!" He blushed a bit but sat up proudly.

Saishu nodded and handed the picture back. "Well from what you say I am sure she will make you a fine wife one day."

"Were you ever married grand uncle?" Naruto asked.

For the first time since arriving Kushina wore a look of sympathy. "Naruto-kun perhaps you shouldn't ask that."

"No," Saishu said mildly. "It's all right." Reaching into a pocket he pulled out a worn leather wallet. From the wallet he produced a picture and handed it to Naruto. Naruto recognized his grand uncle though in the picture his hair was red with a little grey. Standing beside him was a beautiful dark haired woman. In front of the two of them was a red haired boy with a big grin and a whirlpool hitai-ite around his forehead. "That is a picture of my wife Nitsune and our son Daiichi. That was taken just after he became a Genin." He shut his eyes. "That was a very happy day. We were both so very proud of him. He used to struggle some because he didn't have good chakra control. He used to be afraid it would keep him from becoming shinobi. But he worked very hard and I never had any doubts at all." Saishu took the picture back and looked at it for a bit. "He made me very proud."

"I remember Daiichi." Kushina added. "He had the absolute worst time with water walking." She looked at her uncle. "Did he ever finally get it down?"

Saishu slowly shook his head. "No not really. But I'm sure he would have... if he'd had more time." He slowly and carefully put the picture back into his wallet. "I wasn't here when it happened. I was out of the village on a minor mission. When I came back..." He stopped for awhile and neither Naruto nor Kushina knew what to say. He turned to Kushina. "I wasn't here with them, and I just couldn't bring myself to leave. It would have felt like I was abandoning them." He shook

his head. "I suppose that doesn't sound like much of an excuse does it?"

Kushina said nothing.

"Here," Saishu got up from the table. "Since you've agreed to stay for the day I may as well give it to you now." He went over to a place mat in the floor and pulled it aside. It revealed a dirt floor. With his hands he pushed back the dirt to expose a locked wooden door. He ran through a few hand signs and touched it, the door popped open. Reaching in he pulled out two items.

"What are you getting?" Having had his fill of salted cod and white rice Naruto had gotten up from the table as well, as had his mom.

"The legacy of the Uzumaki clan and the payment for your mission." Saishu replied.

"Do you *really* have it?" Kushina asked curiously. "How could you have gotten it? I mean it would have been sealed in the basement safe at the clan house."

"It was." Saishu said. "I used the water breathing jutsu to search for it. It took me over two tears just to find the house. Then it took seven more of digging, searching, and moving rubble. But I finally found it." Turning around he held out a sheathed katana to Kushina. She took it from him and carefully pulled out the blade.

She read the name etched into the blade. "Uzumaki Hogosha."

Naruto looked at her. "'Guardian of the whirlpool?'"

Kushina nodded. "That was the name taken by the founder of the Uzumaki clan." Almost reverently she slid the sword back into its sheath. "This katana is over three hundred years old and represents all that the Uzumaki have stood for."



"Yes," Saishu said sadly. "I *had* to recover it; I could not bear the thought of it being lost forever." He took the blade from Kushina and held it lovingly. "This blade has come full circle. It was held in the hands of the man who created our clan and was the first Uzumaki. Now it rests in my hands as is fitting; for I am the last Uzumaki."

## Uncle Saishu

"But grand uncle!" Naruto said. "You're not the last Uzumaki! Not with me and my mom here!"

Saishu smiled at him. "You and your mother have Uzumaki blood and are family, but you are both of the Namikaze clan now."

Naruto saw his point and slowly nodded. "I'm sorry grand uncle; I'd change my name but..."

Saishu nodded, understanding. "But you want to keep it to honor your father." He reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. "You're a good boy Naruto and I know Minato would be very proud of you."

Looking pleased he rubbed the back of his head. "Thanks."

"Uncle," Kushina said quietly. "What exactly do you want me to do with the sword?"

Saishu let out a depressed sigh. "When I am gone you and Naruto will be the last people with Uzumaki blood. I simply ask you to take ownership of the blade. Display it, lock it away, or put it on a shelf if that is your will. But I ask you to take ownership of it."

"I will. I swear it."

"Thank you." Once again he handed it to her. Taking it she carefully placed it within her back pack.

With that done he handed her a small leather sack. It jingled as he handed it over. "And this is the payment for the mission."

She looked at him with surprise. "You plan on paying for an A-rank with spare change?" She wasn't upset; she would pay for the mission herself if she needed to.

He had a small smile. "Look inside."

She opened up the pouch. With a slight gasp she reached in and pulled a few of them out. They glittered in the fire light. "Gold coins? Uncle where did you get these?"

"From the basement safe of course. Those coins weigh almost half a pound and are probably worth a good bit more than the 50,000 ryu I offered for the mission."

She dropped the coins back into the pouch and tried to hand it back to him. "Keep the coins uncle Saishu." She looked about the small hut. There was a table, chairs, a sleeping mat, a small bookcase with books, a couple small chests, and little more. "You probably need it; I can pay for the mission easily."

He looked at her and lifted an eyebrow. "Is that concern for your old uncle?"

She frowned. "Don't get the wrong idea. I just don't want to leave you destitute."

Reaching into a coat pocket he pulled out a rather thick wad of ryu notes. He opened them and fanned them out to show her they were mostly in one hundred and five hundred denominations. "I'll manage." She looked at him questioningly. "Some of this was also in the safe and when I had to I found work."

"What sort of work?" Kushina asked suspiciously.

"I was an independent contractor." Saishu said.

She frowned at him. "Which is a fancy way of saying you were a mercenary selling your ninja skills."

Saishu crossed his arms over his chest. "Do *not* take that tone with me young lady. I was destitute. My needs were few and I could provide my own food and shelter but weapons, rope, clothing, tools;

those things don't grow on trees. So when I needed to I worked doing what I was best at. What else could I have done?"

"Written to me and asked for a loan."

An extremely unhappy look covered his face. "Ask my niece for a handout? I'd sooner chop off my arm." Kushina glared at him and he glared right back.

Naruto coughed and got their attention. "So grand uncle, what kind of work did you do?"

"Mostly simple body guarding and retrieval. I did accept a few assassinations, those paid better than anything else."

"Assassinations? And what sort of people did you assassinate?" Kushina asked coldly.

"Criminals only, I refused to kill anyone who was not a criminal." He sent his niece a flat look. "Can you say the same Kushina?"

She flushed just a bit in embarrassment and anger. "That was different! I was an ANBU carrying out the orders of our village!"

"Well I didn't have an ANBU or village to rely on. I did what I had to."

"You did what you *wanted* to."

"I did what I needed to in order to continue searching and find the things in that safe."

"Was there anything else in the safe?" Naruto asked. He really wanted to lower the tension in the room.

Saishu nodded. "I was going to save them for later but I'll show them to you now." He went back over to the trap door. "I think you'll like them." Reaching down he pulled out three thick scrolls.

"Are those jutsu scrolls?" Naruto asked excitedly.

Saishu nodded. "Yes, these are all the family jutsus of the Uzumaki." He looked to his niece. "These are yours if you want them."

Though frowning at him she slowly nodded. "Thank you uncle, yes I'll take them."

"Can I have a look at them?" Naruto asked.

Saishu looked at Kushina, at her nod he handed the scrolls to Naruto. "Naruto, you said you were a wind type right?"

He nodded. "That's right."

"I see." Saishu said. "Well just about all of those jutsus are water based. You should still be able to learn and use them, but they won't be as powerful as your wind based jutsus."

"That doesn't mean I won't ever be able to use them. Are any of these S-rank?"

"S-rank? That's a bit ambitious; do you actually know any S-rank jutsus?"

Naruto nodded. "One, the Divine Wind technique. I'd love to learn another one."

"I see." Saishu looked discretely over to Kushina. Despite their differences Saishu recognized that Kushina was the one responsible for him and he would not challenge her authority. She hesitated but finally gave him a slight nod. "Well there is one, but it's extremely difficult to master, and since you're not a water type it will be especially hard for you."

"Can you show me?" Saishu took the correct scroll and opened it. He rolled it out and rolled it out until he got near the end.

"There it is."

To his dismay Naruto saw it was an extremely complex jutsu. But it looked very interesting. "Summoning of the Kraken? What's a kraken?"

Saishu grinned. "A sea monster."

Naruto's eyes expanded. "Cool! Do I have to sign a contract like with frogs?"

Saishu shook his head. "No, the kraken isn't an animal summons. Rather it's a beast from another dimension so no contract is needed. But there are three conditions to summon it once you master the jutsu. One you will need to use some of your blood, two it demands an awful lot of chakra, and three you can only summon it when you're on the ocean."

Naruto looked only slightly let down. If he could only use it on the ocean he wouldn't get the chance to try it very often. But he was still eager to learn it. "Will you help me learn it grand uncle?"

Sadly Saishu shook his head. "I'm afraid neither I nor your mother knows this jutsu. You're on your own."

Naruto nodded. "Not the first time."

Saishu looked at Kushina. "Besides the ryu notes and a few papers there was one other thing in that safe that I know you will like." He went over and took out an extremely thick book with a white plastic cover.

The second Kushina spotted it she rushed over to him. "Is that?!"

Saishu nodded. "It is your mother's photo album."

She gladly took it from him and opened it. "Oh it is! Naruto come here!" As soon as he was at her side she pointed to a picture of a young couple sitting on a couch with two small boys and with a baby

held in the woman's arms. "That is my father, my mother, and my brothers Temjin and Urusai."

"Wow! That is so cool mom!"

Kushina looked at her uncle. "Uncle Saishu thank you! Thank you so much! I didn't have any photos with me and I didn't think I would ever get to see their images again."

He smiled at her. "You're very welcome niece. I'm very glad if I'm able to give you at least a little something to help make up for my failing you and Naruto."

She set down the book and to his surprise she put her arms around him and hugged him. "Uncle you have no idea how happy it makes me just to see their faces again. Thank you, thank you, thank you."

He gladly returned her embrace. "Does this mean I am forgiven?" He asked quietly.

She looked at him, and slowly she nodded her head. "I forgive you uncle. And I am sorry that I was angry at you. I just... wanted my family with me."

He nodded. "I understand and I don't blame you. I am truly sorry that I was such a fool and waited so long to finally see the two of you."

Naruto looked on smiling as the two of them continued to embrace for awhile and to forgive each other.

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Kushina remained in the hut wanting to look at the pictures and remember. In the meanwhile Saishu took Naruto to a row boat to go out and do some fishing. Kushina was happy that they were going to do the male bonding thing.

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"So you've never gone fishing?" Saishu said not believing.

Naruto shrugged. "Nope."

Saishu shook his head. "Naruto I know you don't live by the ocean but there are lakes and streams in Fire country aren't there?"

"Well of course, but fishing just never came up."

"Well that's just sad. It's a wonderful way to spend an afternoon and I can't believe your mother never took you."

"Well we don't really do things outside the estates. When I was growing it up it was just too dangerous."

Saishu looked at him. "Why exactly? Your mother wrote to me that people hated you and wanted to hurt you. I didn't want to believe it as I couldn't imagine them feeling that way towards Minato's newborn son. But if you say it then it must be true."

Naruto stared at him. "You don't know?"

Saishu shook his head. "No, do you?"

When he stopped to think about it he supposed it made sense. They had contacted each other by letter, there was no way mom would have written down that information and sent it out. Even if she had it would have been a violation of the Sandaime's law. Naruto took a deep breath. This wasn't something he enjoyed sharing, but he wanted his grand uncle to know the truth. "Yeah I do. You know that my father died stopping the Kyuubi?" Saishu nodded sadly. "Well he couldn't kill it. The only way to stop it was to trap it in a human container, me. I'm a demon vessel and I hold the Kyuubi inside of me."

Saishu stared at him. "I see, and people blamed you for what the Kyuubi did?"

Naruto nodded. "That's why I almost never left home before entering the academy and why mom had so few friends."



Saishu nodded. The he set down his fishing rod and hugged the boy. "Naruto I am so sorry! I had no idea!"

"That's all right."

"I should have been here to help." He shook his head sadly.

Naruto gave him a big smile. "It's all right grand uncle; at least I finally got the chance to know you." At that moment the rod jerked and was nearly pulled out of his hands. "Gah!"

Saishu laughed. "You got one! Reel him in, reel him in!" Being inexperienced he helped as Naruto pulled in a decent sized fish. He also got a good laugh as his nephew the Jonin screamed like a little girl as the fish flapped about on his lap. It was easily the most fun he'd had fishing since before the earthquake.

---

After a few productive hours they rowed the boat back with a bucket full of fresh fish. On the beach he demonstrated for Naruto the proper method of cleaning fish and tossed the scrap into the ocean. When they returned to his hut Kushina was still sitting by the fireplace looking at pictures.

She looked up at them. "You back already?"

"It's been about four hours mom."

Checking her watch she was surprised to see that it had been that long. "Well did you enjoy fishing?"

To his own surprise Naruto nodded. "Yeah, it was actually a lot of fun." He looked to Saishu. "I wish we could do it again."

Saishu smiled sadly. "So do I."

Kushina nodded. "You can." She said quietly and closed the book.

Naruto grinned. "Does that mean we can stay awhile longer?"

"No, this place is too dangerous now. But," she looked to her uncle.  
"You could come home with us uncle."

Naruto turned an excited grin to him, only to find the man looking downcast. "What's wrong? You said you were sorry you didn't get to spend time with us don't you want to now?"

"Naruto, Kushina, I am dying. I don't know how much time I have but it certainly isn't very long."

Kushina stood up and came over to him. "So you'd rather die here all alone than in the company of those who love you?"

He looked embarrassed. "The truth is, I'm getting weaker as time passes and I don't want to be a burden."

Kushina reached out and took his hands. "Uncle you would never be that! Naruto and I would love to have you with us! *Please* uncle Saishu, we've lost so much time already. Let's not lose what time remains. You said you wanted to get to know Naruto, well here's your chance! And I would love to have you there as well! Please come with us uncle!"

"Please grand uncle!" Naruto said eagerly. "Don't you want to meet Hinata and Alysa and Haku and Kiba and everyone else? I really want you there so please come back with us."

Listening to their appeals his heart ached. And the truth was he wanted to stay with them, he didn't want to be alone anymore. He slowly nodded. "All right I'll come with you."

He was immediately embraced by both of them. "Wonderful!" Kushina stated.

"Great." Naruto sighed.

"You should know though, that I will slow you down to a walk. I can't move fast over long distances anymore." He had a lot of pride and

hated having to expose his weaknesses.

Naruto grinned. "That's no problem. I'll make some shadow clones to carry you!"

Saishu shook his head at the thought that he would need Naruto's help just to get there. Still, he looked forward to finally being with them. "All right lets have some fresh fish, and then I need to pack a few things."

---

Before the dawn Kushina and Naruto waited outside the hut. They had their cloaks and backpacks and Naruto had already created a couple of shadow clones to help his uncle. When his uncle came out he had a torch. He touched it to the hut and let it begin to burn.

"What are you doing?" Naruto asked.

"I will never return here and this is a way to say a final good bye." He tossed the torch into the hut. He had on a simple grey cloak and back pack. The rest of his clothing matched. He looked at the sea and the grassy fields of his homeland. *Goodbye.*

"Ready to go?" Kushina asked gently.

Saishu nodded. "Yes, I think I am."

With that Naruto's clones took a careful hold of him and they began the long journey back to Konoha.

## Getting stronger

**Author's Notes:** Thank you all for giving me over **2,000** reviews! (Does the Naruto victory dance.)

---

He was lying in his cage and enjoying the ride. He figured he was half way there. He smiled trying to imagine the sort of reception he would get. He was sure the whole village would turn out just to see little old him. Well he did like attention. He idly wondered exactly how they would end up executing him. Beheading was the normal method.

He laughed to himself. "Nah way too boring." He was sure they would go with burning at the stake or being torn apart by live animals. "Bet they go with burning me, it's more colorful and takes longer." The Mizukage would want to make a real show of it. He would want everyone to see the fate of those who turned on him. Kisame couldn't blame him; if things had worked out just a little differently the Mizukage would have ended up shaved into a pile of chum. Kisame looked at his surroundings. He was sitting in an iron cage locked inside an iron wagon. He was completely bound up in iron chains with about fifty chakra suppression seals stuck to him. And the ANBU had informed him that if they even sensed him somehow molding chakra they would activate the hundred explosive tags on the wagon and that would be that. Kisame would have preferred that. Not only would that be a quick clean death, it would piss off the Mizukage to no end. Since there was no way he could activate any of his chakra he decided to relax and take a nap.

He didn't know how long it had been that he'd been asleep. He noticed immediately that the wagon had stopped moving. That was odd as from a couple small slits there was still sunlight entering the wagon. The last couple days they had been moving from before sunrise until after sunset. He was wondering why the break in routine.

Then he felt the familiar chakra signature.

*Well this is going to be interesting. I wonder if he's here to kill me or free me.* Kisame laughed as the iron doors of the wagons were pulled open. *Well the Mizukage is going to be royally pissed either way.* Into the wagon stepped a figure wearing a black cloak and red clouds.

"Hello Itachi." He said in a cheery voice.

"Hello Kisame." Itachi replied in his usual polite and unemotional way.

"So what brings you by? You here to kill me?"

Itachi shook his head slightly. "No, our leader has chosen to simply remove you from our membership. The Akatsuki has no further interest in you."

Kisame couldn't help it, he laughed. "Awww, does that mean you came here to save me out of friendship? I am both touched and surprised. I didn't think you had it in you."

Itachi lifted a single eyebrow. "Friendship? No, I am here because you are an extremely powerful ninja who has still not reached his full potential. To let you simply be executed would be a waste, therefore I am freeing you."

"Just like that? You don't want anything in return?"

Itachi considered for a moment. "The Akatsuki would likely object were I to continue to work with you, though they will not seek you out if you simply go. While I have no request of you at this time you may consider yourself to be in my debt. Should I need your help in the future..."

Kisame nodded happily. "I am yours. Now get me out of here." He let out a sigh. "I don't suppose you'd know what became of my sword?"

Itachi nodded. "It was included in the cargo. Though not your ring, that likely remains in Konoha."

Kisame nodded. "No problem it's not like I have a use for it anymore." He smiled. "You know Naruto has your ring now."

"Does he?" Itachi sounded uninterested as he unlocked the cage.

"Doesn't the thought of him wearing the ring he took off your severed arm piss you off?"

"No," he answered simply. "I am relieved to know that when I defeat him I will at the same time recover what is mine."

"Oh yeah when's that going to happen?"

"Not for some time, there is no reason to rush and I think I will further develop my strength before I face him again."

Kisame stared at him as he began releasing the locks on his chains. "Is that *eagerness* in your voice?"

Itachi said nothing more as he freed his former partner.

---

He felt the power surging through him. It was magnificent! He felt like he could do anything! He smiled at the six remaining bandits. There had been fifty of them. Now these six were all that was left. They tossed down their swords and dropped to their knees pleading for him to spare their lives. Pathetic! They weren't ninja of course, but still men should face their deaths with at least a little honor even if they were criminals.

"If you want to live tell me where your leader is. Where is Aikuchi?"

They all began to wail they didn't know. The ninja grinned at them and they knew they were about to die.

"He might be in the cave!" One of them offered.

"What cave?"

"There is a cave about three miles from here where we would hide some of our loot. When we wanted to avoid patrols we would stay there some times."

"I see, and you're sure that Aikuchi will be there?" The ninja asked.

The man shook his head. "No, but he might be there. Especially if he is trying to hide from you."

The ninja thought about it for a moment. "Well it's at least a place to start."

"Will you let us live then?"

The ninja smiled and the men tried to get to their feet as he performed hand signs. "No, Doragon Kasai No Jutsu." (dragon fire) He opened his mouth and out poured a massive stream of fire. The men never had a chance as they were engulfed by the blaze. The one mercy was that the fire was so hot their cries were quickly cut off as they died almost instantly.

The ninja looked at the blaze and the charred remains and felt good. He looked down at his hands with their black marks and laughed, he had never felt more alive before. Uchiha Sasuke felt truly wonderful.

---

"Damn it Sasuke." Kurenai muttered beneath her breath. They had beaten the bandits with ease. When a few of them had made a run for it she had wanted to go after them herself but Sasuke had ignored her and gone after them. Now she was trying to catch up while Sakura and Shino took care of tying up the prisoners. She wouldn't have any trouble finding him, not with *that* chakra signature. Besides, she could see smoke rising up into the air ahead of her.

Coming to a small clearing she found him. He was standing there (laughing?) as a fire consumed the grass in front of him. She could

spot the remains of the six men who had tried to run from them. Sasuke's curse mark was active of course and his skin was marred by those black marks. Though the threat had hardly warranted it Sasuke had activated his curse mark the instant they had attacked the bandit camp. The Hokage had wisely put strict limits onto when he could use that thing. He was not allowed to use it in the village or for practice. The only time he was permitted to activate it was for actual combat. Seeing they were up against ordinary bandits she had asked him not to use it. Obviously he hadn't paid any attention to her. She had tried to be reasonable with him, but it was time to set him straight about a few things. She leapt down into the clearing next to him.

"Sasuke what happened here?"

Smiling he turned towards her. His smile made her worry. "No need to worry sensei, I took care of things."

She frowned at him. "By which you mean you killed them."

He nodded. "Like I said I took care of things."

"Why did you kill these men?" She asked sharply. "Surely they were not a threat to you."

He sneered at the very idea. " *Them* ? I could have killed a thousand like them and never broken a sweat."

"Then why didn't you try and take them prisoner?"

He shrugged. "Didn't really cross my mind, they're only bandits after all. It seemed easier to just clean up the lot of them."

"Clean up?" Kurenai repeated the words with distaste. "These were living breathing men Sasuke, not stains on the wall."

He gave her a flat look. "They were the enemy so I killed them. What's the problem? I'm a ninja and ninjas kill."



She nodded. "Ninjas kill," she agreed. "But we don't kill except when we have to. The last few missions you have been awfully eager to kill. In fact I would say whenever you have your curse seal active you seem most determined to slaughter whoever you're fighting."

"Am I supposed to apologize for that? For wanting to kill my enemies?" He said with a bit of heat. She could sense his chakra level rising a bit, given where it was now that was a frightening prospect.

"Since the battle is over now release your curse mark."

He frowned. "Why?"

"Because I told you to Genin I'm your sensei and it's enough that I give you an order." He didn't immediately obey. "Sasuke release the curse mark or be prepared to be brought up on charges when we return home."

Sasuke gritted his teeth but let it go. He knew it was pointless. Even if he wanted to he couldn't keep it active for long without suffering from chakra exhaustion. But he *liked* the feeling of all that power coursing through him and didn't like being told he had to give it up. As the power left him and the marks receded he felt his strength fade away. He nearly collapsed and Kurenai actually had to grab his arm to support him for a moment.

"I'm fine." He muttered and pulled his arm away from her.

Kurenai sighed. "Sasuke there's nothing wrong with receiving help from members of your team.

He looked at her. "There's also nothing wrong with trying to be as powerful as you possibly can be. I notice that you try and help Sakura and Shino as much as possible. I'm the only one you try and hold back."

"There's an important difference Sasuke. Sakura and Shino are working to develop their *innate* abilities whereas you want to rely on your curse seal."

Instinctively he put a hand to his neck to rub his seal. "So what? It's a tool. No one would complain if I were using a scroll or weapon in battle. Those make you more effective too."

Kurenai looked at him closely. There had *always* been something a little worrying about him. He'd always been a good ninja with the potential to be a great one. But there was something just beneath the surface that was troubling. Since he'd gotten the curse seal it had been coming out more and more. He was obsessed with power and getting stronger. In small amounts that was a good thing in a ninja; it drove them to self improvement. But in Sasuke his ambition to grow stronger swallowed up everything else. She honestly didn't know what to do.

She shook her head. "Sasuke a scroll or a weapon wouldn't affect your mind. I have not failed to note that your personality has begun to change. You always had issues working with your teammates. But now you seem determined to work with them as little as possible."

He shrugged. "I don't mind working with them so long as they don't slow me down." He began walking back. "But I'm going to get stronger no matter what. If they become a burden then I don't need them."

"Teammates are not burdens they are strengths."

"Hn." He didn't feel like arguing with her anymore, it was pointless anyway. "Are we going back now?"

She accompanied him. "I don't suppose they gave you any information before you, 'cleaned up' those men?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, nothing."

---

As they got back to the bandit camp Sakura and Shino had finished tying up about twenty prisoners. Throughout the remains of the camp were bodies, most of them burned up. As soon as they returned Sakura hurried over to them. Kurenai went over to check on the prisoners, knowing she wasn't the one Sakura wanted to talk to.

Sakura hurried up to him and put her arms around him. Like usual she could feel him stiffen just before he relaxed. He was still shy, but had agreed to letting her hug him. "Are you all right Sasuke-kun?"

He could hear the concern in her voice, but for some reason when it came from Sakura it just didn't annoy him the way it did from Kurenai. Likewise he found that her hugs weren't so bad. He had agreed to be a bit more affectionate in public to make her happy and keep her close to him. At first it had bothered him, but he was getting used to it. He deliberately gave her a big cheerful smile. "I'm just fine Sakura-chan. I took care of the ones who got away no problem."

She looked up at him and smiled. "Oh I knew you would! You're so incredible Sasuke-kun!" There was adoration and worship in her eyes and in her voice.

*I really like her eyes.* He caught himself. Just where the hell had *that* come from? He reached out and gently touched her cheek making her blush. "Well thank you Sakura-chan." He said tenderly to her and he saw her blush deepen. *She is really cute.* And to his surprise he felt the sudden urge to be alone with her. Looking over he saw that Kurenai and Mr. personality were busy talking to the prisoners. He stepped back and grabbed her hand. "Come on."

She was surprised but went with him without complaint.

They hurried a bit further into the woods. There was no chance of them getting lost or separated from the others two. Mr. personality's little friends could always find them.

"Sasuke-kun we're going to get in trouble!"

He smiled at her. "Gee Sakura-chan I just wanted to show you something. It will only take a minute." He knew she would go with him anywhere he wanted. He knew she would do anything he asked her to. She was his. He'd seen it earlier and sure enough he spotted it again. He brought her to a halt in the middle of a great deal of underbrush. "Here we are."

She looked at him in surprise. "Sasuke-kun we're still in the middle of the forest what's so special about this place? With a grin he pointed to a tree branch above them. There she suddenly saw a red and white plant. "Oh! A vermala!" And it suddenly hit her that Sasuke had *led* her to the spot right underneath it.

He put his arms around her. "You're trembling." He noted.

"It's nothing," she said nervously. He smiled at her and looked into her eyes. She could feel her knees getting weak.

"Do you remember the dance when I told you that when I kissed you it would mean I would give you my whole heart?"

"I remember." She answered numbly.

"Well that still applies, but we can make an exception for the vermala." And with that he leaned in and gave her what she had been dying for, for so long.

*He's kissing me! Sasuke-kun is kissing me!* She shut her eyes and kissed him back. Had she died then and there she would have died happy.

This was just one more way to control her. That was all it was. He had no real feelings for her at all. None. There was no chance that he could really care for her. Yet he found himself holding her just a little tighter and kissing her more eagerly than he had planned to. *I like kissing her.* He shoved that thought down. It didn't matter if he liked it or not.

"Sasuke, Sakura," the two of them instinctively jumped apart at the sound of their names. They both glared at Shino. Like always he didn't seem to notice. "Kurenai-sensei wants you back at the camp immediately."

Sakura frowned. Hearing Shino's emotionless monotone was like being dunked in ice water. He would have to ruin the single most amazing experience in her whole life.

Sasuke grinned. "Sure, just need to do one thing first." He quickly leapt up to the side of the tree near the vermalas. Clean and swift he cut off a single red and white leaf and put it carefully in a pocket. Then he leapt back down.

"What was that for?" Shino asked.

Sasuke looked at Sakura. "Just something for later." He gave her a little wink. She immediately turned red and tried to hide an excited smile.

*I hope she keeps getting stronger. Sasuke thought. I would hate to have to leave her behind.*

---

Kurenai frowned at the two of them as they returned with Shino. But she decided to say anything; with everything else the two of them going off for a bit was a minor issue. "None of them seem to have any idea where Aikuchi might be. It seems clear he abandoned his men when he found out we were in the area. That means we have no leads as to where he might be. I don't need to tell any of you how vital it is we find him soon. The longer he avoids us the likelier he is to get away with his captive."

"If we don't have a lead what can we do?" Sakura asked.

Kurenai frowned. "I hate to do it, but we're going to split up and search." At times like this she wished Sasuke was a Hyuga rather than an Uchiha. "See if you can pick up any sort of trail, but if you do

find something be very careful and don't try and engage him! Our opponent in a missing nin and a Jonin, we'll deal with him as a team." She looked directly at Sasuke. "Is that clear?"

*Hah!* Exactly what I was hoping for! "Yes sensei, very clear."

---

About three miles away he found the entrance to a cave hidden behind some bushes. Right behind the bushes he spotted a bunch of cigarette stubs and knew he was in the right place. Leaving those stubs there was poor discipline; those bandits really were a bunch of incompetent idiots. Stepping into the cave he activated his curse seal, his sharingan was already active. He knew there was no hiding his chakra signature.

"Come on out and face me." Sasuke called out. "There's no getting away." He was hoping that Aikuchi was actually here and not twenty miles away. So he was very happy to see the missing nin step out where he could see him. Even better he had his captive. He had the lord's eight year old daughter in front of him. One hand was clamped over her mouth while the other held a kunai to her throat.

"Tell the rest of your team to get away from the cave entrance and let me go or I swear I cut her throat." Aikuchi said desperately.

Sasuke looked at him with disappointment. He'd been hoping for a real test of his skills. "My team isn't here, I tracked you down alone."

"Sure you did! Like some child would try and face me alone, even with all that weird chakra. Now call to your team and stand aside."

Sasuke smiled. "I have a better idea. How about you let the girl go and the two of us fight?"

Aikuchi looked at him as though he were insane. "I don't care about fighting you! I just want to get away from here."

Sasuke shook his head. "You're not leaving this cave alive." The little squirmed a bit as the man's grip on her tightened.

"Shut up!" Aikuchi was definitely looking scared now. "If I don't get out of here she dies!"

Sasuke shook his head. "The only way out of this cave is through me. Just let her go and take me on."

"Forget it kid! Now get out and call to your team."

Sasuke looked at the little girl. "Close your eyes for a second sweetheart." The little girl did so.

"What are..."

In a blur Sasuke crossed the space between them, grabbed the hand holding the kunai at the girl's throat, yanked it back and shoved the missing nin's hand back so he drove it through his own left eye.

Grabbing the girl he picked her up and carried her out of the cave. *Too bad it was so easy I really wanted a challenge.* He smiled to himself even as he tried to calm the crying little girl. *So that was a Jonin huh? I'm not impressed.*

---

"Well sensei?" Sasuke asked with a grin. They had just returned the girl to a very happy and grateful lord of the land of fire. They had accomplished their B-rank and it was all thanks to him. "How'd I do?"

Kurenai looked at him. Shino and Sakura were still inside. "Things worked well Sasuke and I'll right you a formal recommendation. But..." she focused on him sharply. "I am still worried about you and your behavior. You need to focus more on your team and less on acquiring more power."

He just smiled at her. They both knew he was not going to change a thing

On the way home with his squad he was in an excellent mood and even invited Sakura to come join him and his family for dinner. He thought about what it had felt like to light those worthless bastards up like torches. He remembered the ease with which he had killed a Jonin whose skills Kurenai had respected. Most of all he remembered the sense of power that ran through him whenever he activated his curse seal. He looked down at his hands. The hands that would kill Naruto and then Itachi, but Naruto first. *I'm getting stronger every single day. Your time is coming monster, soon.*



## Two words

Tsunade entered the main interrogation room of ANBU headquarters. Ibiki was already seated at the table with the missing nin. She had come in of her own free will claiming to want to defect to Konoha. As such she was classified as a, 'guest' rather than as a prisoner, though that could change. Tsunade eyed the young woman sitting there. According to the interrogation report she had an unpleasant manner. She'd been warned to behave herself in the presence of the Hokage.

"Ibiki tells me you wish to defect to Konoha."

The young kunoichi looked decidedly unhappy as she nodded. "Yeah, I..." she bit down on whatever she was about to say. "I would like to be a Leaf ninja."

"Why?" Tsunade asked suspiciously. She knew the stated reasons of course. Everything had been in the report. But Tsunade wanted to hear and judge for herself.

The kunoichi frowned. "Well basically I'm tired of having to run and hide from hunter nins all the time. I also want a home and a place for myself."

Tsunade frowned. It *sounded* like the truth but... "Considering what you've done that's asking a lot."

"I..." she again choked back a reply. "I know that. That's why I brought you my, 'present.'"

Tsunade nodded. "And quite a present it is. But whether or not we should accept it at face value is another matter."

The kunoichi's short temper was starting to fray. "Look why would I turn myself over to you if this were a trap? I know you'd kill me!"

Tsunade nodded. "We certainly would, but you might be doing this to save someone else or out of devotion to your leader."

"I'm not that selfless." She said flatly. "Look I've told you there's someone who I *know* will vouch for me."

"He's not in the village right now, but he should be back soon." She gave the girl a flat look. "Are you *sure* he will vouch for you?"

She nodded. "I'm sure. He seemed like a decent guy... if kind of scary."

Tsunade stared at her. "You should meet his mother some time. Very well, until Naruto's return you'll remain here as our guest."

"You mean prisoner." The kunoichi muttered.

"No. I mean guest. You'll stay in an apartment rather than in a cell, and we won't chain you up."

The former missing nin mumbled something but otherwise remained quiet.

---

The three members of team 7 returned from their B-rank. The gate and most of the southern wall was still rubble. But at least the guard station had been rebuilt. Katetsu and Izumo were the ones manning it today. Hinata went up to them immediately.

"Have Naruto and Kushina come back yet?"

Izumo shook his head. "Sorry, but they haven't."

"Oh," Hinata felt her spirits plummet. Their mission had lasted three days and she'd really hoped they would be back.

"Come on Hinata-chan," Kiba tried to cheer her up. "I'm sure they'll be back any day now."

She nodded. "I know, I just really miss him." Since starting the academy they had hardly spent a day away from each other. It had only been two weeks but it felt like months to her.

"Listen you two can head home. I'll go report in." Kakashi told them.

They thanked him and each headed home.

---

Temari noted all the hostile looks she was getting. Even though she wanted to she knew she couldn't glare back at them. A kunoichi could get away with that. A hostage was expected to be calm and accepting. Without conscious thought she walked a little closer to Shikamaru.

He looked at her. "You all right?"

"Sure," she said dully. "I love having people look at me like I was a rabid dog."

"Come on, is it really that bad?" He had noticed the looks but was at a loss at what to do. How could you stop people from looking at someone?

"No, it's worse. At least the dog could bite someone."

He looked at her in surprise. "Now that doesn't sound like the scary girl I know."

She frowned at him. "I'm a hostage now. I'm expected to be polite, accepting and non violent."

He smirked at her. "Non violent huh? I'll keep that in mind the next time you hit me. Ow!" He looked at her as he rubbed the back of his head. "Hey! What happened to being non violent you troublesome woman?"

"That's with *weapons* you lazy idiot!" She saw they had arrived. She took a deep breath. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea."

"What are you talking about? You said you wanted to have a flower garden."

She nodded. "I did. I had one in Suna and I loved it."

"Well this is the only place to get flowers or flower seeds in then village." He could see Temari was reluctant. "You're not *scared* are you?"

"Hah! As if this would scare me." She sighed. "I just don't want to have to deal with her, she hates me."

"It's been a month. I'm sure Ino has healed some and will be more polite this time."

Temari chuckled grimly. "Care to bet?"

"No." Shikamaru reached out and carefully took her hand into his. She started and felt her cheeks get just a touch of color. "It'll be all right come on."

She didn't argue with him as he opened the door and led them into the Yamanaka flower shop. What she did was carefully close her fingers around his.

---

Hayate arrived at the guard station with he team he had been temporarily assigned. The C-rank had been accomplished without any trouble. He turned to his two short term students. "You both," cough cough. "Can head home. I'll," cough. "Report in to the Hokage. You both," cough. "Did very well."

Gabrella bowed to him. "Hayate-sensei, thank you again for the lessons in swordsmanship. They were very interesting."

Hayate grinned and nodded. "My style is a little..." cough cough. "Different from Kushina's. See if you can integrate what I've taught you with," cough cough. "Her style."

A beautiful purple haired kunoichi in ANBU armor landed at his side. Yugao gave him a quick kiss and the two were soon walking away hand in hand.

Watching the two of them go she turned to her teammate. "That's sweet walking hand in hand like that."

Haku nodded. "It certainly is."

"So, you feel like getting a late lunch?"

He nodded. "Certainly Gabrella, in fact allow me to pay for it."

"Oh?" She grinned at him. "So you want to pay for our meal? Gee that sounds a little like a date."

"It does?" Haku sounded nervous.

Gabrella couldn't help but widen her grin. He was just so cute when he was flustered and nervous. "It sure does." She stood close to him and nonchalantly put a hand on his arm. "So is it?"

He began to blush. "Do you want it to be?"

She laughed. "Way to be decisive." She smiled at him for a bit, enjoying the sight of his near panic. "How about we just call it lunch, *this* time?" She moved the hand on his arm down and placed it into his.

He smiled at her a bit shyly and carefully closed his fingers around hers. "All right."

Hand in hand they went off to get some lunch.

---

"I see." Hiashi said simply. Returning from each mission she was required to report to her father the mission's details. It was not unlike the report given to the Hokage. "Very well, you may go."

"Hai, father." She bowed slightly and exited his study. She no longer dreaded going to his private study as she once had. Since her great improvement trip there had become sources of boredom rather than dread. She let out a long held sigh. She just wished he would be less formal with her and more like he had been before Kaasan died. He was so cold and distant. When she wanted warmth and comfort she turned to Naruto and Kushina. He was her heart and her courage. Kushina in the meantime had grown into a second mother for her. She never expressed that out loud, but it was how she viewed her. Being away from Naruto for so long was very hard. Not being able to turn to Kushina for guidance or comfort made it that much harder.

She suddenly came to a halt as her sister stepped out in front of her. "Hinata."

Snapped out of her thoughts Hinata looked at her younger sister. "Oh hello Hanabi, I'm sorry I'm very tired right now and want to rest. I will see you later." She tried to step around the younger girl only to have her sidestep and block her.

"Neesan, I challenge you to a match!" Hanabi declared.

Hinata sighed. "Fine sister. We can spar tomorrow morning before I leave to meet my team. She didn't like sparring with Hanabi. Before training with Naruto her younger sister had actually *beaten* her a number of times. But that had been a long time ago. Hanabi had been no match for her for over three years. Hanabi was actually quite good for her age; but their current skill levels were simply too far apart.

"No! Not tomorrow! I want to fight you right now!" Hanabi demanded. "I am going to prove to father my worth. All he *ever* says to me is that I am *nothing* compared to you!"

Hinata frowned. Ashe could well remember what it had been like to have father belittle her skills while comparing her to another family member. She sympathized with her younger sister's predicament but couldn't really help her. She knew her sympathy would not be appreciated and to deliberately lose a spar was dishonorable.

"Hanabi I will spar with you tomorrow. I've just gotten back from a mission and am tired. So please excuse me." Hinata again tried to get past.

Hinabi shoved her back and dropped into a jyuken fighting stance. "Byakugan," she activated the family blood line. "No! I said I was fighting you today!"

"Byakugan," Hinata regretfully dropped into a stance as well. "Don't do this sister. Spars are only permitted in the dojo. If we fight here in the hall you will be punished for it."

Hanabi was about to reply when the sharp rap of a cane on the wood floor drew the attention of both of them.

"Hanabi, stop this foolishness right now." Neji said. "Hinata has already agreed to spar with you tomorrow. Just wait until then."

"Stay out of this Neji!" Hanabi said venomously. "This has nothing to do with you!"

Actually," he approached the two of them with his slight limp. "It is my concern. As a cadet branch member it is my duty to protect the main branch members."

Hanabi was furious. "Typical! Everyone is always worried about protecting Hinata!"

But Neji shook his head. "No Hanabi, I am trying to protect you. If Hiashi-sama learns about this he will *severely* punish you." Neji grinned. "Who knows? For such a gross violation of the rules he may

even put the caged bird seal on your head and place you in the cadet branch."

Hanabi paled under such a threat. "Father wouldn't do that!"

"Are you sure? Not even if he caught you attacking the clan heir in the middle of the hall?"

Hanabi scowled but deactivated her byakugan and stood straight. "Fine!" She glared first at Neji and then her sister. "I will wait until tomorrow." She stormed off.

Hinata deactivated her own byakugan. "Thank you Neji."

"It is quite all right." He chuckled. "It's a bit odd plying the peacemaker rather than the troublemaker for a change." He smiled at her. "Say Hinata, you haven't been starting any fights with Lee have you?"

"What?"

He laughed. "Never mind."

---

Hearing the little bell connected to the door jingle Ino looked up from the magazine on the counter. "Welcome to the Yamanaka flower shop." She smiled seeing Shikamaru. "Oh hey Shika what..." Then she spotted Temari. Her eyes turned to slits when she noticed they were holding hands.

"What the hell is she doing here?" Ino demanded.

Shikamaru let out a breath. "Temari wants to start a flower garden and needs to get some seeds."

Ino crossed her arms over her chest. "We don't have any."

"Ino..." Shikamaru began but was cut off.



"I said we don't have any! Not for her!" Ino glared at Temari

Temari met the glare with ease. Under different circumstances she would have taught the girl some manners. But she was bound by the requirements of being a hostage. "Shikamaru let's just go, it's not a big deal."

"No," He surprised both girls by the vehemence of his answer. "Ino, I know you've suffered losing your father just like I have but you can't take it out on Temari."

"Of course I can! She's the enemy! She and all the others helped kill my father!"

"Ino she's not the enemy anymore. Now all she is, is an honored guest of my clan. One who wants to spend money in your shop. As for what she did during the battle she was simply a soldier following orders. Please stop being so troublesome."

Ino glared at him. "You two are getting pretty chummy huh? Don't you have any shame? She and the others like her betrayed and attacked us. How can you like her after that?"

"Easy, because she's a good person." He looked at Temari. He still hadn't let go of her hand. "Kind of scary a lot of the time and very troublesome, but a good person. Kind of like you Ino. I know you're way too good a person to really punish someone for doing their duty. Now can we *please* get some seeds?"

Ino continued to frown but uncrossed her arms. "I'll do this for *you* Shika, but she is still not welcome."

As Ino headed towards the back to get some seeds Temari leaned close to him. "Thank you." She whispered.

He just nodded. "You're welcome troublesome woman."

---

"I'm so glad you're back Hinata." Alysa said. "I asked Hanabi to play with me but she just ignored me and said she needed to train."

"I'm sorry if she was a bit mean to you Alysa-chan, Hanabi has certain issues she is trying to deal with."

"When will kaasan and niisan be back? I really miss them."

"I know, I miss them too. I don't know when they'll be back but it should be soon."

Her radio crackled to life. "Hinata-chan? Can you hear me?"

She immediately slapped the send button. "Naruto-kun! Is that you?" She said excitedly.

"Hinata-chan it's so good to hear your voice again! I've missed you!"

"Oh Naruto-kun I've missed you too! Where are you? Are near the south gate?"

"Yeah we'll be there soon. Can you come meet us? There's someone I really want you to meet!"

"I'll be right there! I'll see you soon Naruto-kun." All the sorrow of the past two weeks was now completely forgotten.

"Can I come too please?" Alysa pleaded.

"Sure! Let's go and meet them!"

---

"So this is Hinata." An old man smiled at her and then at a somewhat shy eight year old standing next to her. "And you must be Alysa! I am very happy to meet both of you."

Hinata bowed to the man. "I am most pleased to meet you Saishu-san. It is wonderful that Naruto has found some family."

Alysa stared up at him a bit nervously. "Are you *really* niisan's grand uncle?"

Saishu smiled down at her and nodded. "Yes I really am, if you don't believe me just ask Kushina."

Alysa nodded a bit. "Does this make you my grand uncle too?"

Naruto and Kushina had explained things to him so he understood the little girl had with them. "Well of course, if you Naruto's little sister then that would make you my grand niece."

Alysa began to smile. "Will you tell me stories sometimes?"

And much as Naruto normally did he reached down and rubbed the top of her head. "Of course I will."

Kushina smiled. "From now on when Naruto and I are both away on missions he'll be the one taking care of you."

"I will?" He asked nervously.

Kushina nodded firmly. "Welcome home uncle, I hope you enjoy babysitting."

A bit off to the side Naruto had Hinata in his arms and the two of them were kissing. Hinata found she didn't mind doing that in public. She was so happy to have him back she just wanted to kiss him and hold him even if the whole world saw.

"Welcome back Naruto-kun." She squeezed him just a bit tighter and pressed her face into his neck. "I don't ever want to be away from you again."

He held her a bit tighter as well. "I don't want to be away from you either Hinata-chan, but orders are orders."

She nodded. That was a truth about shinobi life. They served their villages at the Hokage's wish not their own. "Well at least you should

be getting a few days before your next mission."

"Ah Naruto."

They both looked up. "Hey Kakashi niisan," Naruto said. "It's great to see you. I want to introduce you to my grand uncle Uzumaki Saishu."

Kakashi nodded to the man. "Naruto I can't wait to hear all about how your uncle and how things went, but right now the Hokage needs to see you."

" *Now?* " Both Hinata and Naruto chorused.

Kakashi sighed. "I'm afraid so. Come on let's go."

---

Surprisingly they didn't go to the tower but instead met the Hokage at ANBU headquarters. They were escorted to the main interrogation room where Tsunade, Ibiki, and one other waited for them. As soon as they entered Naruto recognized her.

"You!"

Tayuya grinned and nodded. "When I heard the stories I knew it had you be you. Namikaze Naruto, demon of the leaf."

"What are you doing here?" Naruto asked.

"She is here requesting to become a leaf ninja. What do you think about that?" Tsunade interjected.

Naruto looked at her closely. "I'm not sure, I don't really know her."

Ibiki flipped open the report that was in front of him. "She says that during the battle her squad encountered you. She said you killed her squad mates and were in a position to kill her as well but instead let her go, telling her to leave the battle and not return. Would you say that is accurate?"

Naruto nodded. "Yeah I guess I would."

"Why did you spare her Naruto? She didn't really give us a reason." Tsunade inquired.

Naruto looked at the red haired girl. "You didn't tell them about what your friend was up to?"

She seemed to squirm a bit in her seat. "No I left that part out."

Tsunade frowned. "What are the two of you referring to?"

"One of her teammates was about to rape a girl when I showed up." Naruto said bluntly. Tsunade had a look of disgust. "She was trying to stop him. That's why I let her go."

"I see." Tsunade said flatly. She leaned back in her seat. "Naruto what would you say if I told you that she brought us some very interesting intel that was offering in exchange for joining us. Would you believe it?"

He thought about it, then slowly nodded. "Probably, she didn't seem the suicidal type. I don't think she would give herself up and then try to trick us."

"I see." She looked to Ibiki. "Return her to her apartment; she remains under confinement for now."

"Hey!" Tayuya demanded. "Do you still not f&#king believe me?"

"I do, but until this is over you remain at that apartment without contacting anyone." Ibiki took her away. She focused on Naruto and sighed. "I hate to do this to you Naruto, but you and your team are leaving on a mission tomorrow morning."

"WHAT?! But godmother I just got back not fifteen minutes ago!"

She nodded sympathetically. "I know Naruto but it can't be helped. If the information Tayuya brought us is accurate we have to act on it

immediately. We can't risk circumstances changing. Your team has reconnaissance and espionage specialists and you and Kakashi are two of the most powerful ninja in the village. Your team is ideal." She looked at both of them very seriously. "Kakashi, Naruto, I am assigning team 7 an S-rank mission of the highest possible danger and importance."

"S-rank?" Kakashi said nervously.

"Really?" Naruto sounded eager. "What's the mission?"

She frowned. This was yet another one of those times when her personal wishes conflicted with what she had to do as Hokage. Yet again she was putting her god child in terrible danger. "We'll start going over the mission details as soon as we get Hinata and Kiba here, but I'll tell you the mission objective. I can state it for you in just two words."

"Yeah?"

Tsunade looked at him and spoke. "Kill Orochimaru."

## The caged bird

Karin listened to the hum of the motors as she saw the lights in the corridor flicker for a moment and then go off. She looked at the read outs and sighed. She normally had about half a dozen lab assistants working for her doing the menial tasks. But since being assigned to save Lord Orochimaru's arms she'd decided there was no choice but to work alone. She simply couldn't risk anyone else finding out the truth. The truth being of course that she had no freaking clue how to accomplish her goal. She had taken samples of Orochimaru's blood and given him some x-rays. She was in her lab twelve or more hours a day busy, 'experimenting.' A lab assistant would have revealed all her activity was nothing but a smoke screen to convince Orochimaru and others that she really was making progress and working hard towards her goal. Of course being tasked to do this by Orochimaru had given her carte blanche to do anything she wanted, no matter how strange. For instance right now she was running her, 'healing energy motors' and draining most of the power from the base. The previous base commander had been livid at the idea and refused to allow her to draw so much power into her lab. She had gone to Orochimaru and told him the commander was getting in the way of her work. Not fifteen minutes later he had been butchered in the command post as others stood there and watched. The current base commander was only too eager to give her *anything* she wanted.

Of course the one thing she wanted most of all she was forbidden by Orochimaru himself to have. She could not leave the base. Anything she wanted to send out, anything she wanted delivered to her, would be done instantly. But she herself was a prisoner in fact if not name. Worst of all Orochimaru had decided to remain here until she either cured him or her time limit ran out.

"I hope things are going well Karin-chan." He'd said to her just the other day. "I would hate to have to find someone else to be my chief researcher."

She shivered at the friendly tone he'd used. At least when she was dealing with test subjects she never pretended to be their friend. She let out a sigh wondering if she really only had weeks left to live. She knew she could get out of the base if she needed to. The problem was if she did that she had no faith she would be able to long escape the hunter nins. Curing him was impossible. Escape was likely to only buy her a few days or weeks. So she had come up with a third alternative.

---

The five of them had been sitting at the small table going over the impressive stack of documents laid out before them.

"Is all of this real?" Naruto asked suspiciously. "I mean medical data, security codes, base blue prints, and even someone inside ready to help us? It just seems way too good to be true."

Tsunade frowned. "I know exactly what you mean. That's why I had Ibiki interrogate her fully and even waited to have her talk to you. It does seem like a bit much but Ibiki believes her testimony to be true. And we have some corroborating evidence from other sources."

"Just what sort of evidence?" Kakashi asked.

"We've received reports that Orochimaru has been severely wounded since the attack. We'd also received word that he was unable to perform jutsus." She had a grim smile. "It looks as though Sarutobi was able to cripple him in their fight."

"So is that why he ran away?" Kakashi asked.

Kiba laughed. "Oh man I can't wait! If he can't work any jutsus he'll be a sitting duck!"

Tsunade and Kakashi both frowned. Tsunade's frown deepened when she saw Naruto smiling in obvious agreement.



"Don't believe that for even a second!" Tsunade barked out. "He's a Sannin just like me. Even if he can't work jutsus or use his arms he is still unbelievably dangerous!"

Kiba grinned. "What's he going to do? Bite me?"

"Maybe," she said flatly. "Keep in mind he can still use his legs and still has the sharingan. He is an evil genius and I wouldn't even try to guess just what sort of nasty surprises he might have prepared."

"You've never actually seen him." Kakashi said quietly. "I got to know him as a young ninja. He is very frightening."

Naruto looked at him in surprise. "Niisan you actually sound a little scared."

Kakashi looked back. "If you'd ever known him Naruto you would understand why."

"Is he *that* powerful?" Naruto inquired.

"He was considered to be your father's equal in every way." Tsunade said bluntly. "That should tell you everything you need to know."

Naruto slowly nodded as he digested that.

"Hokage-sama, if he is truly so powerful why are we being assigned to assassinate him?" Hinata asked.

"Because unfortunately your squad has the right abilities for this task. You and Kiba will aid in reaching the target undetected. While Kakashi and Naruto will be able to deal with the actual assassination."

"What?" Kiba sounded offended. "We just help them get there and they're supposed to do the actual job? How come?"

Tsunade looked at him. "How many people have you killed Kiba?"

He looked embarrassed. "Well, none."

"None." She repeated. She looked at Kakashi. "How many have you killed?"

He had served in the third great ninja war and been a legend in the ANBU black ops. "A little over six hundred total." Kakashi answered.

"What about you Naruto?"

Naruto looked uncomfortable and his eyes flashed to where Hinata was. "I don't know exactly, but somewhere over three hundred."

She looked back to Kiba. " *That's* why."

"Hokage-sama," Kakashi spoke up. "While I appreciate the faith you're showing in us don't you think we should have some back up?"

Tsunade shook her head. "Kakashi this mission will take you deep into enemy territory. Stealth will be the key to survival not only getting there but coming back. Any more than the basic four man platoon will make it difficult to mask your movements. Believe me; I am not eager to send Naruto and the rest of you into Rice country. But this is simply too good an opportunity to pass up." She sat back. "Go there, make contact with this traitor, eliminate the target, and then get out of there."

Naruto asked, "What do we do with him? The one who sent Tayuya all this info and wants to help us?"

"When you are near you will contact him on the radio frequency as specified and he will help you enter undetected. Once that is done you'll simply let him go."

"Let him go?" Naruto asked. "That's it?"

Tsunade nodded. "Apparently whoever he is he is desperate to leave Orochimaru's service. All he wants is for us to help him leave and to

kill Orochimaru." She looked at Kakashi. "I want to hear your opinion Kakashi."

He looked down at the documents. "If all this is real then of course we have to take advantage of it. And even though I would feel more comfortable with a larger strike force I believe this team can do it."

Tsunade nodded. "So do I."

---

"You're leaving tomorrow morning? On an *S-rank* ?" Kushina sounded furious.

Naruto just nodded. "That's right mom me and my team, so I hope it's o.k. that I asked Hinata-chan over for dinner."

She waved that away. "Of course it is. But what is Tsunade thinking? You just got back, and why is she sending you on an S-rank?"

Naruto smiled. "Because she knows me and my squad are awesome."

Kushina frowned. "They are S-ranks for a reason Naruto-kun. She shouldn't send you on such dangerous missions." She looked at her son carefully. "I don't suppose you'd care to tell me about the mission?"

He shook his head. "Mom, you know I can't do that!" He smiled at her excitedly. "But I promise to tell you all about it when I get back! You'll be amazed!"

She shook her head. "Seeing you this excited only makes me more worried."

---

He had really wanted for grand uncle Saishu and Hinata to get to know one another before they left for the mission. His mom had

already made a medical appointment with the Hokage to see what could be done for him.

"I really hope godmother can help him." Naruto said. They'd had a really nice dinner and now he and Hinata were sharing a bench in the rose garden. It was just starting to get dark and the air was crisp. She was snuggled up close to him and he had his arms around her.

"I'm sure the Hokage will be able to do something." Hinata said. "I really like your grand uncle; he seems really wise and kind."

"Yeah I like him too. I really hope godmother can fix things." Having her in his arms he leaned in close to her. "I really missed you Hinata-chan." He said softly.

A light crimson touched her cheeks. "I missed you too Naruto-kun." She closed her eyes as he kissed her and happily returned his affection. *Naruto-kun, I don't care where we are or what we do. So long as we are together I am happy.*

---

They were looking out from a second story window over the rose garden.

"They really are very cute together aren't they?" Saishu said with a grin.

Kushina nodded. "They were even cuter when they were little. I'll show you some pictures."

Alysa let out a sigh. "Kaasan?"

"Yes dear?"

"Will I ever get to fall in love like that?"

Kushina smiled and hugged the little girl. "I'm sure you will honey, but give it time. You have a lot of growing up to do."

Saishu chuckled and rubbed the top of her head affectionately. "Just make sure not to break too many hearts when you're older."

---

It was a quarter to six in the morning and both his mom and grand uncle were up to wish him well. Kushina hugged her son and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Please be careful Naruto-kun. Whatever the mission is, take it seriously and come back unhurt."

He nodded a huge smile on his face. "I will mom."

Saishu grinned. "When you get back Naruto we'll find a place where we can go fishing."

"I'd really like that."

"And we'll see if your mother still remembers how to cook fish."

"What?" She turned on him. "Are you questioning my cooking skills old man?"

"Just wondering if you still remember anything about how to make fish. You know those little creatures that live in the water?"

Seeing his mother starting to turn red he decided it was a good time to get going.

---

"Breathe deeply once more please." Tsunade said.

Saishu complied.

Tsunade ended the diagnostic jutsu and frowned worriedly. "Your lungs and repertory system are in terrible condition. What happened? Are you a heavy smoker?"

He shook his head. "I used a jutsu to breathe salt water."

She quirked an eyebrow. "That's it? Even if the jutsu didn't work as well as it should have that wouldn't explain the extensive damage."

"I used it hundreds of times."

She grimaced. "Well that would explain it. Had you not come here you would have only had a few more months."

Kushina couldn't bear it. "Can you help him Tsunade?" She pleaded. "I know that if anyone can it would be you."

Tsunade slowly nodded. "I think I can repair most of the damage." She looked at Saishu sternly. "You must never use that jutsu again and you must never smoke or even be around smoke, your lungs will remain weakened for the rest of your life."

Saishu nodded. "I have no reason to use that jutsu and I've never been a smoker. I thank you for whatever you can do to help me."

Tsunade nodded. "Since you're in good health otherwise I'll go ahead and schedule the operation for tomorrow."

"Will he be fully healed?" Kushina asked.

Here Tsunade shook her head. "Not completely, the damage is too extensive for that. But it should be enough to allow him to live normally for a good many years."

Both Saishu and Kushina were incredibly happy and relieved to be told that. It looked like Saishu would be part of the family for some time to come.

---

It had taken six days to reach their goal. Going on a straight line they could have reached it in four. But the need to avoid any contact with any one had led them to take a round about path. Whenever Kiba or Hinata would warn them there was someone in the area, ninja or civilian, they would detour away. Doing so they had crossed into

Rice country and masked their presence. They approached the mountain base that was their goal. They waited until after dark to make their approach.

"So do you think all this is just a trap?" Naruto asked Kakashi in a whisper.

Kakashi set his radio to the frequency that had been provided. "We are about to find out." He hit his send button. "Hawk to caged bird, please respond."

# Snakes

"Turkey, ham, salami, cheese, lettuce, onion, mustard and mayo." As she slapped on each she piled up the sandwich and then slapped on another piece of bread. Then taking it with her she went over to the couch. She just had on some baggy shorts and a plain white T shirt. Sitting down she leaned back, put her feet up on the little table in front of her and began eating.

Her visitor eyed her critically. He had no idea how she'd been raised but he had all the manners of a pig in a pen. "You're going to get crumbs in the sofa."

She glared at him as she finished chewing what was in her mouth. "Who are you my f#&king mother? Like I f#&king care about crumbs." Given the clothes lying on the floor everywhere he could believe that. "So are you here to interrogate me again?"

Ibiki shook his head. "I'm here to ask you a few questions not interrogate you."

"What's the f#&king difference?"

He frowned at her. "The difference is that if this were a proper interrogation you wouldn't be having a sandwich and sitting on a couch." He had to admit that dealing with her was a unique experience for him as an interrogator. Usually his subjects were scared to death. Either they knew who he was and his reputation or were terrified by being dragged to ANBU headquarters. Of course he got his share of tough guys who didn't scare easily. But they always saw him as the enemy and acted accordingly. Tayuya was truly not afraid of him, she saw him as nothing but a civil servant doing his job. Having someone view him as merely annoying was... different. And not a good different. But he had orders from the Hokage to treat her as a guest. "In any case I need to ask you a few more questions."



"More f#&king questions? I've been doing nothing but answering questions since I got here. I've told you about the Sound village, the curse seal, his forces, his past movements, how I was recruited, some of his jutsus, what the hell else do you want?"

He frowned at her. "I have a great many more questions to ask you and you *will* answer them or I will inform the Hokage you are no longer being cooperative."

"I never said I wouldn't answer." She took another bite. "So?" She asked with a mouth full of food.

*Someone really needs to teach this little girl some manners. Too bad it can't be me.* "What do you know about enemy operatives, spies that might be in Konoha working for him?"

"Spies?" She shook her head. "I was a part of his elite bodyguard, I didn't deal with spies." She thought for a second. "Well except for the geek."

"Geek?"

She nodded. "I was part of his bodyguard a couple times when he met with him. The guy wore a Konoha hitai-ite so I guess he had to be a spy. I don't know his name though."

"Can you describe him?"

"Tall, thin, silver hair, with glasses, around my age maybe a little older, very quiet, you know a basic geek."

Ibiki frowned. Something about her description touched a memory. "So he was a teenager with silver hair and glasses?"

She nodded. "Oh and I think he was a medic nin. Lord Orochimaru mentioned something about his working medical jutsus one time."

He looked at her sharply. "Are you *sure* he was a medic nin?"

She shrugged and wolfed down the last of her sandwich. "No, not really, but I think so."

"If I show you a picture would you be able to identify him?"

"I guess."

Knowing what they would be discussing Ibiki had brought a copy of the ninja registry with him. Within were the pictures and records of every active leaf shinobi. "Here take a look and tell me if you see him."

She took the registry and began flipping through it. Until she came to a stop. "Here he f#&king is."

He looked over to where she had the registry open. "Are you sure?"

She glared at him. "Of course I'm f#&king sure! He's the geek."

Ibiki slowly nodded. He knew him, Yakushi Kabuto; he had attended the Chunin exams and was currently receiving training from the Hokage herself. This could be bad; the Hokage would not like one of her students being a traitor. He took the registry back and stood up to go. "Thank you, we will talk again tomorrow."

"Whatever."

---

Karin felt the communicator buzz and sudden hope and dread filled her heart. She had already checked today to make certain there were no listening devices in her lab. She switched on the communicator and hoped this was what she'd been hoping for. Tayuya was an acquaintance, not quite a friend, she had gotten to know. Using some of her connections she had managed to get a message out to her. They had quickly made a deal, they would help each get what they wanted. Karin had passed on the information and Tayuya had agreed to deliver it. Now she was likely to find out if her plans had succeeded or killed her.

"This is caged bird, go." She spoke into the radio communicator.

*A woman's voice?* Kakashi shrugged it didn't really matter. "This is hawk; we have come here for the Crow. Are you prepared to assist?"

"On condition that the caged bird goes free."

"Yes, that is the agreement."

"Enter through point G in thirty minutes I will meet you there and assist."

"Thirty minutes understood, out."

"Out."

Karin switched on her generators to full power, that would shut down the security cameras and most of the base's systems. Now she hurried to her computer console and quickly got to work. Being a genius had its advantages, most people had no idea just how much you could do with computers so long as you knew the language they spoke. Theoretically it was even possible to connect all the computers in the world into one massive community and have all that information available to any user any where in the world. She smiled at such an outlandish idea. Before that happened there would need to be phone lines and radio systems to connect all the lands together. Phones, radios, and computers were all strictly for local area use.

She shook her head. This was no time for day dreams. She downloaded all the information into a single disk. Popping it out she smiled and put the precious disk into a case. The disk had *everything* she'd ever worked on; all the secrets of the curse seal and other more interesting experiments. Once she was free and Orochimaru was dead she could sell it to the highest bidder and never worry about money again. In the meantime she had a nice thick wad of ryu notes in her lab coat to tide her over. She couldn't risk going back to her rooms and changing, once she was free she'd

buy herself a new wardrobe. With her one precious disk in a lab coat she typed in a command to the console and checked her watch. She set the tapeworm program to begin erasing everything in the database. As paranoid as Orochimaru was about secrecy the information had not been backed up anywhere else. That still left the hard copies in her lab, all the papers and records. She got out a five gallon drum of kerosene and hurried over to the file cabinets. Opening the drawers she quickly doused them and splashed kerosene all over the lab. She checked her watch again; she had ten minutes to meet with her rescuers. She set the timer on a small detonator to fifteen minutes.

She thought for just a second about the possibility that that call had come from one of Orochimaru's men and she was heading into a trap. But she shook off that possibility. If Lord Orochimaru had even suspected what she had in mind he would have strolled into her lab and dealt with her immediately. She would not have gotten the chance to do so much harm. With everything now set she left her lab for the last time and went out into the darkened corridor where the emergency lights were on and flickering. Now it was time to make a run for freedom and the good life.

---

Team seven had rushed towards the base and were at point G as it was marked on the blue prints. It was nothing but a nondescript section of the wall. There had seen a patrol go past here just two minutes earlier and if things continued to match their observations it would come back through in eight minutes.

"What do we do if this turns out to be a trap?" Naruto asked quietly.

Kakashi smiled. "Probably die or get taken prisoner."

Naruto grimaced. "Well that's a cheerful thought!"

"You asked."

"Someone is coming." Hinata whispered, her byakugan was active. They all looked about. "I mean from inside."

Not long after her warning a section of the wall opened and the secret door there became obvious. Karin had only learned of it and of the passage way when she'd pulled up the base blueprints. She stepped out into the night and met the four Leaf nins. She had no time to waste.

"Orochimaru should be in his rooms as they were marked. He can't use his arms or work jutsus but he has a sharingan and can extend his neck maybe twenty yards to bite. The security system is down as are most of the lights, there'll be an explosion in," she checked her watch. "Nine minutes." She went past them. "Have fun storming the castle and you had *better* kill him."

"Hey! We don't even know your name!" Naruto protested as she went.

"What do you want a date?" She said frostily and then leapt away as fast as she could.

"Forget her it doesn't matter who she is, let's go, Hinata I want you to warn us if we're about to run into anyone. We'll avoid them if at all possible. Now let's move!" Kakashi led them in through the secret passage way.

---

Orochimaru stared up from his bed towards the ceiling. The pain medication did little to ease the agony coming from his limbs. *I am not going to live like this for three years! Damn you sensei! Why couldn't you have just died like you were supposed to?* Outside his door he heard some noise. He muttered to himself, what were those incompetent guards doing? He had just gotten up off his bed when his door exploded.

"What?!" He leapt back and activated his sharingan. Two figures entered his private quarters. One he immediately recognized and

Kakashi with a rakiiri forming in his hand. The other was a mere boy with blonde hair and a katana in his hands. He could guess who the boy was. "Come to pay me a visit Kakashi? And you must be Minato's brat."

Naruto growled. "We're here to kill you."

"This is the end for you Orochimaru! For your betrayal and crimes against Konoha we have come to carry out the sentence of death." Kakashi rushed forward with his lightning blade and Naruto with his sword.

Tracking them with his sharingan Orochimaru bent backwards and away from them. With a leg sweep he managed to trip Kakashi, Naruto turned and came straight at him even as Kakashi stumbled to get back up. Opening his mouth a snake spat out and from the snake's mouth exited a long straight blade. Naruto was too close to dodge and it went into his chest.

Orochimaru laughed. "I am full of surprises."

The skewered Naruto grinned just before puffing out of existence.

"So am I!" An angry voice said from behind as a katana's blade went in through his back and out through the front.

Orochimaru's sword dropped from his mouth as he looked at the boy. "Not bad."

Kakashi was on his feet and had his rakiiri ready for the death blow. "It's over."

"Not yet," he hissed. His head snapped back and his jaws seemed to unhinge themselves. From out of his mouth a gigantic white snake leapt out.

---

At that moment there was an explosion from somewhere and alarms began to sound. Kiba and Hinata were watching the corridor and keeping their escape route open while Kakashi and Naruto performed the actual assassination. Along with the klaxon they could also hear the sound of shouts and running feet.

"There are about twenty men coming this way." Hinata warned.

"Are they just guards or are there any ninja?" Kiba asked.

"Just guards."

Kiba nodded. "No problem for the three of us then." Akamaru shouted his agreement. Hinata dropped into a jyuken fighting stance ready to do her part.

---

Orochimaru's 'body' dropped to the floor like a shed skin. Kakashi slammed his lightning blade into the snake's form even as it was escaping from Orochimaru's mouth. He was rewarded with an explosion of very dark blood and the sight of the snake's tail end being torn away from the rest. The snake howled in pain and twisted about.

Naruto wrenched his bloodied sword out. "How the hell did he summon this thing without hand signs? And where did he go?"

"Naruto! I think this is Orochimaru's true form!"

Naruto looked at the monster with disgust. "You mean he's not human?"

"Not anymore." Kakashi swiftly formed another rakiiri as his exposed sharingan tracked the snake's sudden strike. "Naruto move!"

The snake's open mouth snapped forward aimed at his chest. Naruto dodged back only a step and brought his katana slicing up from his waist. As the large head just missed him his blade entered the

fanged mouth. The snake's own momentum drove it into the cutting edge. Naruto was drenched with back blood as his katana cut along the side and tore open a gaping wound. In pain and blind fury the snake lashed about and knocked him back as it twisted around. The katana was torn from his hands and was lodged on the snake's right side

Enraged and in pain the snake reared back to attack Naruto again only to see Kakashi coming at it. At the last instant it tried to dodge, but with Kakashi using his own sharingan he was able to strike again ripping into the snake's flesh.

" **Rasengan.**" Naruto formed his own attack jutsu and joined in. He struck the back of the snake that was facing Kakashi. Using a lot of chakra the rasengan did not merely cut into the snake's body, it tore it in half.

The half with the head and the lodged katana landed on the floor at Kakashi's feet. It twitched and slithered about desperately trying to get away now, but it could hardly move. Orochimaru was doomed; exposing his true form had been an act of desperation. He was simply too large a target to avoid his enemies strikes or get away. If he'd been able to possess one of their bodies he might have survived. But then if he could have done that he wouldn't have been in danger to begin with as he would have had his jutsus.

Kakashi approached carefully and created one last lightning blade. It was eating a lot of his chakra but he wasn't taking any chances. "Do you want the honor of the killing blow Naruto?"

Naruto shook his head. "No niisan, you can have it."

"All right, I'm just sorry I couldn't have had this chance years sooner." With that he plunged his hand into the snake's head. With that the great Orochimaru, both genius and monster, finally died.

"Our orders are to destroy the body completely." Kakashi said as he activated a simple fire jutsu.



"All right." Naruto yanked out his katana and left the room to join Kiba and Hinata in the corridor. There were twenty men on the floor all of them unconscious. "We did it; we're going to leave in a second."

Hinata asked. "He's really dead?"

Naruto nodded warily. "He really is." They had accomplished their goal, but now had to make it back alive.

Kakashi exited the room that was now ablaze. He quickly covered up his sharingan again. He was sweating and puffing a bit. "All right let's get out of here same way as we came."

With Hinata guiding them they began to move.

---

There was a knock on his door. Not expecting visitors Kabuto answered it. To his surprise there were two ANBU standing there.

"May I help you ANBU-san?" He said politely.

The one in the owl mask spoke. "Come with us please, you are needed to answer a few questions at ANBU headquarters."

"I see." He answered with a smile.

Activating his chakra blade he moved with lethal speed taking them by surprise. The one with the owl mask got his throat cut while the other had his heart sliced in half while still inside his chest. It was not the first time Kabuto had been underestimated. If the ANBU had suspected what he truly was there would have been at least a dozen of them. He dragged the bodies swiftly into his apartment and put on one of their uniforms. Time was of the essence so he would not bother taking anything with him from the apartment. There was nothing incriminating in it anyway. He was much too smart to ever write anything down that might prove dangerous.

He had always known that his time in the leaf village might end suddenly and now it had. It his work as a spy was over and he would need to return to his Lord Orochimaru. Leaving the only home he had ever really known he had three regrets. He would like to have said goodbye to his adoptive father. He would have liked to have done the same with his only real friend Noval. And he would have liked to have completed his last mission; but it seemed Tsunade's death would have to wait. But he might make time for one quick stop before leaving the village.

---

"Sasuke there's a phone call for you." His mother said.

"I've got it mom thanks." He waited for her to click off. "Yes?"

"Sasuke it's your good friend." He didn't name himself but he was sure Sasuke knew his voice. "A little trouble came up so I'm taking a little trip. Just wanted to let you know."

"I see," Sasuke spoke carefully. "Would this trouble have anything to do with me?"

"No, of course not." A cheerful voice answered. "Though a few questions may be asked there is no reason for my trouble to bother you. I'm not sure when we'll see each other again, but I suspect that we will. I'll give our mutual acquaintance your best." With that the line clicked dead. Sasuke hurriedly hung up his end and returned to his room.

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Kabuto hung up the pay phone and headed fort the gate. With the ANBU's face and id leaving the village would be no problem at all.

# Celebrations

**Author's Note:** Thanks to everyone who has been enjoying this story. A special thanks to all of you who have taken the time to leave reviews. I am going to go ahead and ask for opinions on something. Now normally I hate polls but this will have nothing to do with the story itself, but only with the format of the story. Simply put this is turning out to be a very **long** and complex story. As I enjoy complicated and detailed story lines. I have no idea how long it will take to finish but I am sure it will go over a hundred chapters. So here is my question; would you prefer the entire story be written under one title or to have it broken up into at least two? I am a bit worried that new readers will be scared off if they see a story with that many chapters. However I do it the story will be written at the same pace. I would just like to know if you would prefer one really massive story or have this one completed and the story continued in a sequel. This isn't really a poll, I will ultimately decide how I want to proceed, but I invite you to tell me what you think.

---

They were two days out of the enemy base when a single sound nin approached them. Both Hinata and Kiba confirmed that he really was alone rather than a scout for a larger party. He was a deathly pale and thin teenager with white hair and two red dots above his brow. Though it was obvious he was ill the sound nin attacked the four of them without hesitation. He had a unique ability to draw bones from his body and use them as weapons.

The sound nin stood calmly in a field surrounded by Kakashi, Kiba, Hinata, Naruto and a hundred clones. He was sweating and clearly having difficulty breathing. Despite being an enemy and attacking none of them had any real desire to kill him.

"Look," Naruto spoke to him. "You can't win this fight. Just leave and we'll let you go."

The teen shook his head and charged holding a long hunk of bone like a sword. "I have no desire to live now that he is dead." As he charged he was met by a dozen clones.

Naruto was surprised to see the bone actually stand up to cuts from a katana. He was even more surprised to see the skill with which the teen defeated his clones. "You're a fifth level master of the blades."

He nodded. "I am, not that it matters now that he is no more."

"You mean Orochimaru?" Naruto asked.

"Yes."

"He betrayed the leaf village and was our enemy." Naruto said flatly. "It was our duty to kill him."

The sound nin nodded. "Yes, I understand that. And it pleases me slightly to know he met his end at the hands of ninjas with honor. But he was the only one who ever truly understood me, the only one who ever cared. I am ill and am soon to die. When I die my clan will die with me and be no more. I had hoped to live on in Lord Orochimaru's heart. But now that he is gone when I leave this earth I will truly be forgotten."

Kiba shook his head. "You actually think a bastard like him *cared* about you? You were just brainwashed."

Fury filled the young man's eyes. "Shut up! What the hell would you know about it?" He charged forward and Naruto and his clones got ready. But after taking four of five steps he suddenly cried out and clutched his chest. Blood poured from his mouth and he collapsed in the grass.

"Naruto be careful!" Hinata called out as he rushed to the ninja's side.

Naruto knelt beside him. It was obvious that the young man was at his end. Naruto did not want him to die alone and took his hand. "I'm sorry." The ninja looked up at him, but if he wanted to say something he was unable to as his breath left him and he died.

Naruto got back up. The rest of his team was beside him. "He reminded me a little of Haku. I think everyone needs at least one precious person in their lives."

"Too bad his had to be such a complete bastard." Kiba remarked.

Naruto couldn't really argue that. Kakashi spoke. "All right, we have to keep going, we're not out of Rice country yet and we still may run into enemy patrols."

Naruto and the others nodded. All but two of the clones disappeared in a puff of smoke. "Give him a proper burial." The two clones nodded. Naruto and the rest of his team got moving again. *I never even knew his name.*

---

They ran into no further trouble and team seven returned home early in the afternoon of October eighth.

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"You're absolutely certain?" Tsunade asked.

Kakashi nodded with a smile beneath the mask. "Yes Hokage-sama, the Sannin Orochimaru is confirmed dead."

"Who had the killing blow?" She asked.

Kakashi shrugged. "That would be me. But," he added quickly. "I couldn't have done it without my team's help."

She nodded smiling at the rest of the team in her office. "That of course goes without saying. You should all be very proud of yourselves. You've helped remove the greatest threat Konoha has

ever known." She turned her focus back to Kakashi. " *You* though are going to be known as the killer of Orochimaru." She reached into a desk drawer and took out an envelope. "Here, this is yours." She handed it to him.

"What is it?" He took the envelope warily.

Tsunade smiled. "That is a certified check for fifty million ryu, the total of all outstanding bounties on Orochimaru."

There was complete silence for a moment.

"Cool!" Kiba said. "Lunch is on sensei from now on!"

"Niisan!" Naruto was just able to catch him as Kakashi fainted.

---

"Hah! I still can't believe you fainted like that sensei!" Kiba joked as they left the restaurant. Naruto had actually wanted to go to Ichiraku's but Kiba was loudly insistent they go to a more expensive steak house.

Kakashi rolled his one visible eye. "Fine Kiba the next time you get handed a check for fifty million ryu you had better not faint."

Naruto looked at him curiously. "What are you going to do with it?"

Kakashi smiled. "Invest it." *Hmmm, I wonder if the publisher for the Icha Icha series is available for sale.*

"Well just be sure to put some of that into a present for me." He looked at them all eagerly. "You do all know my birthday is tomorrow right?"

"Of course Naruto-kun! We could never forget that!" Hinata said excitedly.

He had a huge grin on his face. "So you're all coming right?" Technically his birthday was on the tenth, but they always celebrated

a day early. The tenth remained a day of mourning for his family as much as for the rest of Konoha.

"Naruto-kun of course I'll be there!" Hinata answered.

"Right, like I'd miss a party." Kiba grinned and Akamaru barked enthusiastically.

Kakashi had whipped out his little orange book and was engrossed in it. "Oh was that tomorrow?"

"Niisan!" Naruto pouted.

"Let me just check and see if I have anything scheduled."

---

"Welcome home Naruto-kun!" His mom gave him a big hug as he walked in the door. Along with his mom, Alysa, Saishu, and Haku were also there to greet him.

*The family's getting bigger.* Naruto had a huge smile on his face. "It's great to be home!"

Alysa ran up to him and gave him a hug as soon as his mom let go. "I missed you niisan!"

"Well I missed you too imouto." He reached down and playfully rubbed the top of her head.

"We have some wonderful news!" Kushina said happily. "Tsunade was able to treat Saishu! Uncle should make a full recovery!"

"That's great!" He went over and gave the man a hug. "Grand uncle I'm so glad you're better!"

The older man grinned peacefully. "Thank you Naruto, now I just hope we can finally get to know one another." He chuckled. "How about a fishing trip tomorrow? We can go in the morning before the party. It can be my present to you."

Naruto nodded excitedly. "That would be great grand uncle!" He looked at his mom. "So we are having a party tomorrow?"

She looked back in surprise. "Well of course we are Naruto-kun! Do you think I would let you turn 13 without celebrating?"

He rubbed the back of his head. "Well I did just get back; I might not have made it back here by tomorrow."

"So?" Kushina shook her head. "Naruto-kun if you hadn't been here we just would have held the party whenever you got back. It's not the actual day that matters, it's being with the people who love and care about you and celebrating another year of your life." He smiled and nodded. His mom had a way of really getting to what mattered. "So since the mission is over now can you tell us all about this S-rank? Seeing you in such a good mood I know it must have been successful."

"Yes Naruto," Haku added. "We have all been most curious."

"Oh well I can definitely tell you now." His excitement was mounting. "Me and my team just got back from killing Orochimaru."

The three ninjas in the room stared at him silently. Alysa was looking at all of them in confusion wondering why all their mouths were hanging open.

"What?" Kushina finally managed to squeak out.

"We killed Orochimaru!" He said proudly. "We snuck into his secret base and assassinated him!"

Kushina stared at her son. "Naruto," she spoke carefully. "Are you saying that the Hokage sent you and your team out to kill one of the Sannin and possibly the most dangerous ninja in the world?"

"That's right!" he suddenly gulped as he felt a massive killer intent coming off his mom. "Mom what..."



"I'LL KILL TSUNADE!!"

It took about half an hour for everyone to finally convince her that killing the Hokage would be a bad thing.

---

The word leaked out surprisingly fast. Well before the official announcement was made, first to the council and then to the public, rumors were flying. People on the street were saying that the Hokage had avenged her teacher by killing the traitorous snake. Through out the afternoon word and rumors spread and as such stories tend to they changed as they went around the village. Tsunade had gone in secret and killed him. Kakashi had done it. Naruto, the demon of the Leaf, had done it. A team had done it. A single ninja had. Orochimaru had died in hid sleep. He had fought and the battle had destroyed the Sound village. The rumors continued to spread until the official announcement was made. Kakashi was named as the one to deliver the death blow, but the Hokage made it a point to mention the other team members by name. Thus in her official proclamation she made sure that all the members of team seven would go down in the history books. With Orochimaru's death now confirmed impromptu celebrations began. People literally danced in the street to know the man who had killed the third and caused the attack on their village had finally been punished. Small fireworks were lit off and there was laughter and shouting in the streets.

From her office window Tsunade looked out at the village that was celebrating. "What a wonderful day." She said.

"How about you let me take you out to celebrate it?"

She turned from the window to look at her guest. "Is this another one of your lame attempts at getting a date?"

"That depends," Jiraiya grinned. "If it is will you finally say yes?"

"No."

He shrugged. "Well in that case it's not."

Despite herself she chuckled. "Well since you just got back can I assume it's for Naruto's birthday?"

His good mood leaked out and Jiraiya took on a serious look. "Well that's the main reason but there's more to it."

She sat down at her desk and motioned for him to have a seat as well. "The Akatsuki?"

He nodded. "I still don't know very much about them, but one thing is becoming clear, Kisame wasn't exaggerating about how powerful and driven they are. Their leader, this Pein character, I still don't know much but it looks like he'd Sannin level *maybe* higher." He had of course read all the information from Kisame's interrogation.

Tsunade gaped. Jiraiya loved to tell a good story. But when it came to reconnaissance and information gathering he had always been accurate and on target. He would not make such a claim lightly. "As bad as that?"

He nodded. "Hanzo is afraid of him."

Tsunade slowly nodded. That said it all. Hanzo was the most powerful ninja and leader of rain country and had been the one to name her, Jiraiya, and Orochimaru the Sannin. They'd been the last survivors of a brutal battle and he easily could have slain them. But he had instead chosen to honor them for their ability to survive. If *he* was afraid...

"And this man wants Naruto?" She asked quietly.

Jiraiya nodded once more. "He wants all the biju and jinchuriki; he's gathering their chakra, for what final purpose no one but him seems to know. I don't believe Naruto is in immediate danger as yet. But they will come for him at some point. From what I've gathered from

their past history I expect Itachi will come after him again, but if he fails Pein may just decide to take a direct hand."

"I see," she leaned back and thought. "As powerful as he is, he's still nowhere near Sannin level. He's approaching Kakashi but I'd slaughter him, so would you, or the snaky bastard if he'd had working arms." She sighed. "Kisame said he had three years at most."

Jiraiya shrugged. "That very well may be true, I have no way to confirm or deny it." He gave her a stern look. "At some point in the not too distant future Naruto is going to have to face these men. He needs to become much stronger."

"I can't deny that," she eyed him warily. "Why do I get the feeling you have something in mind?"

"I want him to be my apprentice."

Tsunade frowned, but did not immediately reject the idea. "Kakashi might not like that, but there's no denying he could learn a lot from you. Do you plan on moving back into the estates?" He had moved out of the Namikaze estates some months ago. Ironically enough about the time that she moved into the Hokage mansion.

But Jiraiya frowned at her. "That's not quite what I have in mind. I mean to be a full time teacher for him not just when he's between missions. I also want to show him how to run a spy network and what different countries are like. I want to give him my full knowledge and experience. Minato was like a son to me and I think of that kid as a grandson and as an heir. I want to take him with me for two and a half years on the road."

Tsunade stared at him before giving him a firm answer. "No."

He frowned. "Tsunade..."

"That's Hokage-sama to you."

He took a deep breath. She was going to be a hard ass about this. "All right *Hokage-sama* the fact is he'll learn more from me as a full time apprentice then he will if he stays here going out on missions every few days."

"Oh and I'll just bet that the very first thing you teach him is how to peek into a ladies bath house!"

"I taught him that a long time ago."

She snarled and leaned forward. "What?"

He ignored her posture and crossed his arms. This was too important to be scared off. "If you're worried about his morals don't be," he gulped. "I'll swear not to do any research for the whole time he's with me."

She gawked at him. " *You* are going to quit trying to look at naked girls?"

"While he's with me, yes, I'm willing to do whatever is necessary to have him apprenticed to me."

She sat back again and let most of her anger go. The pervert must have been really worried about her godson. "I'm sorry Jiraiya, but the answer is still no. If you want to train him you can, but he stays in the village." She smiled. "There are plenty of things that he'll learn by going on missions."

"There are," he agreed. "But most of those lessons he already has and the rest won't save him when Itachi or Pein come for him."

She frowned. "That's what his teammates and fellow Leaf nins are for."

"The last time Itachi came after him he was on his own."

"They got to him in time."

"He was lucky." Jiraiya said flatly. "The next time he might not be as lucky."

"Oh but you think he'll be safe with you? Just the two of you hundreds or thousands of miles away?"

"As a matter of fact I do. I can protect him and if I have to I can make us disappear. You *know* how good I am at that when I want. He'll be much safer with me than being hundreds of miles away on missions."

She frowned. The truth was he was safer with Jiraiya than with Kakashi and his squad mates. The problem was... "I can't let you take him away for years. He's too important to this village. Besides me, his mother, Hinata, and too many others would miss him too much."

Jiraiya quirked an eyebrow. "You and others would miss him too much? Is this about making you and Kushina happy or about what's best for him?"

"I don't believe this is best for him. What's best for him would be to stay right here and keep developing as a Jonin."

"Yes, right up until the Akatsuki decide to pay a visit."

Tsunade shook her head. "Even if I agreed with you, which I don't, you would *never* get Kushina to agree to this."

"He's an adult. I don't need her permission."

Tsunade chuckled. "Oh you want to take her boy away for a couple years without her agreement? Go right ahead, I'll send flowers to your funeral." She gave him a stern look. "And don't get any stupid ideas about kidnapping him if he agrees. I'll declare you a missing nin and I'll track you down myself."

*Well so much for that idea. "You aren't doing him a favor by denying him my help."*

"Help him by all means, but he stays here."

---

Sasuke sat by his window and listened to the distant echoes of cheers and laughter. Every once in awhile a sky rocket would explode and there would be more cheers drifting in on the wind. Fortunately the Uchiha compound had not followed the rest of the village into idiocy. Orochimaru's death was good news and well received, but Kakashi and Naruto were not beloved figures. Sasuke looked out into the night sky. The curse seal seemed unaffected. So long as he still had that additional power he would not shed a tear for Orochimaru. With him dead and Kabuto gone from the village life would be easier for him. He watched another sky rocket climb up into the darkness and exploded. He could hear the soft remnants of cheers carried on the wind. *They really do love him, even knowing the truth. Fools.*

---

Early the next morning Saishu had taken him to a small pond only about five miles from the walls of Konoha. Saishu supplied the rods, the bait, the tackle box and a bucket to hold what they caught. They didn't have a boat so the two of them simply walked out into the middle of the water and fished from there.

"Grand uncle how did you find this place?"

Saishu smiled. "Oh it wasn't hard Naruto. There are plenty of places to fish around here. Fire country is full of lakes and streams. I honestly can't believe kooky never brought you here or somewhere like here to fish."

Naruto stared at his grand uncle. "Kooky?"

Saishu smiled. "That was your mother's nickname growing up. She used to be a real tomboy, always trying to get attention and always

wanting to fight with her brothers. She was a troublemaker and used to play pranks on everyone."

Naruto stared at him. "My mother did that? I don't believe you! Mom would never be like that!" He spoke with conviction.

Saishu laughed at the boy. "Naruto you forget, you've only known her as an adult and as a mother of course. Near all my memories of her are as a child and a young adult. She was very different before meeting your father and having you."

Naruto tried to imagine his mom pulling pranks or causing trouble. He couldn't imagine it. "Grand uncle do you have any stories about my mom when she was growing up?"

He laughed. "Tons of them. Let me tell you about the time she got caught spray painting the statue of our clan's founder. You see..."

Naruto spent the next few hours listening to stories about his mom's hellion days and pulling in a few fish.

"My mother never did that!"

Saishu had a belly laugh, not just from the memory but from the look of horror on Naruto's face. "Yes she did!"

"She gave him a chocolate bar that was really a laxative?"

"Yes! And she did it right before he was supposed to go on a mission! Oh Urusai was furious with her!" Saishu checked his watch. He then looked at the bucket that was more than half full of fish. He nodded happily. "Come on Naruto time for us to get back."

"No way! I want to hear some more stories."

"Later I promise, but you don't want to be late for your own birthday party do you?"

---

Naruto's 13th birthday party was the largest one yet. Along with inviting all his friends and former classmates Kushina had also invited Gabrella and all of the Suna hostages to attend. This was mostly done for Alysa's sake as she could play with them without worrying what some parents might think. This also allowed Temari to come with Shikamaru. When asked they were not a couple, but they danced only with each other and were hardly ever apart. To Naruto it reminded him of how he'd been with Hinata before their first kiss. Ino and Chouji were also there of course. Chouji seemed to accept Temari, though he lacked any enthusiasm. Ino deliberately refused to speak with the girl or with Shikamaru when she was standing next to him. Given what Ino had lost Naruto had gotten permission from Hinata to have one dance with her. This seemed to make her happy without upsetting Hinata. Up until the end of the dance when Ino had given him a light kiss on the cheek before he could react. Ino had then wisely fled before Hinata could strangle her.

Gabrella was there and Naruto managed to make a little small talk with her. He thought she might be o.k. despite her clan. But he was still a long way from trusting her. He noted that she and Haku seemed to spend a lot of time together. They also had two or three short dances together. Gabrella was the sole Uchiha present as Sasuke was not there. Sakura wasn't present either though Sino was.

Jiraiya was back in the village and managed to pull him aside for just a few minutes.

"Naruto, I'd like to give you some extra training."

"That's great pervy granddad!" Naruto knew something was wrong when he frowned but didn't actually complain about his nickname.

"Naruto, I'm going to try and spend more time in the village then I'd originally planned. Whenever you and I are both in the village I want you to spend as much time training with me as possible, I have a lot of things I need to teach you."



He smiled. "Sure Jiraiya-sensei," if he was offering to give him all this additional training Naruto decided he could be more polite. "I'll be happy to train with you when I'm not on missions or training with my squad." For some reason that made the man frown. Naruto couldn't guess why.

"That'll have to do." He muttered then planted a false smile on his face. "Happy birthday Naruto."

Naruto had a lot of fun introducing his grand uncle to everyone and his imouto to those who had not yet met her. The better part of the evening was spent dancing with Hinata. That was the highlight of the evening; surpassing even the presents or the cake. Being with her on the crowded dance floor made him very happy. Having so many people to celebrate with was also a joy to him.

For once Kakashi was not the last person to arrive, that honor went to his godmother. And as soon as she came in through the door she had gathered up him, Kakashi, Kushina, and Jiraiya. She herded them all to the study so they could talk.

---

Bone and ash. That was all that was left now. Kabuto sank to his knees in the blackened room. He stared at the charred remains of the most amazing man he'd ever met. He had once called Sasori master and pretended to have loyalty to the third and fifth Hokages. But in his mind only Lord Orochimaru had ever deserved his *real* loyalty. He reached out and took a hand full of ashes. *Orochimaru-sama you were almost a god walking this earth. You had great power and wisdom. Truly you were deserving of the titles Sannin and Otokage. Men feared and obeyed you and you were mighty. And what are you now? A handful of ash and a memory, nothing more.* Had there been an actual body he could have absorbed some of it into himself, perhaps saving a little of Orochimaru's legacy. But he could not absorb DNA from ash and scorched bone. He dumped the ashes back to the floor.

He stood up and began to leave. The base had been abandoned. The moment it was confirmed that Orochimaru was dead a power struggle had begun. Four or five different sound ninjas were fighting it out to become Otokage. The sound village was descending into civil war. The greatness that Lord Orochimaru had created was being lost by petty small minded men who just saw a prize to be won. He found such small mindedness disgusting. He was leaving Sound, whoever wound up as the next Otokage was unimportant to him. With Orochimaru gone he had no loyalty at all to the village hidden in the sound. The question was where to go to now? He could remain on his own and live as a missing nin; he was smart and strong enough to survive. But he liked being close to a source of great power. He nodded to himself making a choice. Sasori still believed him to be his servant. He was blithely unaware that his mind control jutsu had been broken by Orochimaru. He would return to Sasori and the Akatsuki. But he would keep an eye out for things and follow his own path in time.

---

"What's going on Tsunade?" Kushina asked.

"Yes," Jiraiya looked at her suspiciously. "What are you up to?"

She smiled. "The reason I was late is because I was busy having a number of private one on one meetings with some of the leaders of the Council. I wanted to sound them out about something, and happily with one exception they all agreed."

"Agreed to what?" For some reason Jiraiya thought he wouldn't like it.

She smiled at Naruto. "I've brought you another wonderful birthday present Naruto-kun."

Naruto grinned. "Well whatever it is it couldn't top the Shodai's necklace."

Her excitement seemed to mount. "Well no, but it might come close." She swept him up into a hug. "Do you remember when I gave you that necklace that I promised to help you reach your dream?"

"Sure godmother!"

"Well Naruto-kun I've taken a very big step towards that. Sometime before this year ends I am going to officially name you as my eventual successor."

---

"You wanted to see me uncle?" Sasuke asked as he stepped into Riyuki's study.

Riyuki nodded wearily. "Yes I did Sasuke; you know that though I am now clan head that you remain heir? Despite my daughter's wonderful improvement you remain the future of this clan."

Sasuke nodded proudly. "Of course uncle, I appreciate how you went out of your way to assure me of that."

"Well nephew I just came home from a long and painful meeting with the Hokage. You should know the disaster which is now coming. Lady Tsunade intends to name Namikaze Naruto her successor, and I have no doubt the Council will agree."

"But she can't do that! Naruto's a demon! If he becomes Hokage! Then, then..." The possibilities were too horrible to imagine.

"Then Konoha will be in dire danger." He let out a sigh.  
"Unfortunately, there is nothing we can do."

"But we have to stop this! Naruto *cannot* be allowed to rule this village!"

"It is the will of the Hokage and she has the support of the Council who now see him as a hero rather than a threat."

"That doesn't matter!" Sasuke declared. "We can stop him!"

Riyuki eyed him with worry. "How exactly?"

Sasuke's voice dropped to a whisper. "We can kill him."

"No!" Riyuki said sharply. "Absolutely not! He is the heir of the Namikaze clan and under the protection of the Hokage and the Hyuga clan! If we were to assassinate him we would surely be found out and that would mean a civil war! A civil war that would likely end in our extermination."

"But..."

"Sasuke I forbid you to even mention this again! Do you understand?"

"So we're going to do *nothing* ? We're going to just sit back and wait for the apocalypse?" Sasuke was angry and desperate. Was he really the only one who could see the village was doomed if Konoha fell into Naruto's hands?

"I never said that we would do nothing. We will not however take any rash actions that could destroy the clan. Even if she does name him and it is approved by the Council it will still be many years before she is ready to retire. In that time we will work on her and on the other council members to make them see reason."

"That will never work! She's his *freaking godmother* ! She'll never change her mind, and once she has him installed as successor the Council will never have the guts to so offend the Hokage as to rescind her decree."

"It is still a better course of action than what you suggest."

"Well it's certainly easier and safer."

"Enough Sasuke!" Riyuki shook his head wearily. "I spent most of an hour arguing with Tsunade I don't want to argue with you. I only told

you this as I did not want you taken by surprise when it is announced. Now please leave me, and remember I forbid you to mention your wish to *anyone!*"

He bowed formally. "Yes uncle." He left the study.

As he went back home from his uncle's house he had already made his decision. *This has gone far enough. I will **not** just stand by as he comes just a step away from being Hokage! I'm going to kill you Naruto, even if I have to die too.*

# Everything changes Part 1

It was October 10th, the thirteenth anniversary of the Kyuubis's defeat. This was also the day the Yondaime had died, Naruto had been born, and the Kyuubi had been implanted within him. And now, exactly thirteen years later this would be the day that the Kyuubi died. It was well before dawn. Sasuke was dressed and ready. He had made his choice. Really he'd made it years ago and never once thought about changing it. Uchiha Sasuke was actually very intelligent and hard working and quite deserving of the title, 'genius.' Unfortunately, one thing he had never been was very introspective, he preferred to look out at the world and at others rather than inward. He saw himself as strong willed and committed, not blindly stubborn. Once a choice was made he stuck with it no matter what. He could never admit, even to himself, that he might be wrong. No, the great, the heroic, Uchiha Sasuke could never ever be wrong, because that would make him too human and ordinary. In his own eyes he was special, with a special duty that no one else could possibly carry out. He saw himself as a tragic but heroic figure. Doomed to sacrifice himself for the greater good. He nodded, that felt right, he would do what he had to, no matter what. Well before the sun's arrival he leapt out of his window and hurried out of the Uchiha complex. Taped to the back of his door was a letter addressed to his mother.

---

She heard a gentle rapping on her window. Slowly Sakura opened her eyes. She gasped to see there was a figure at her window and very nearly cried out. Instead she threw on a robe and opened up her bedroom window.

"Sasuke what are you doing here? Do you know what time it is?"

"Sakura, I need you." His voice was low but shaking with emotion. She saw more feeling in his face than she could ever remember. "I need you to come with me right now."

"Now? But Sasuke it's..."

He reached out and put his fingers to her lips silencing her argument. "Sakura, please, I need you."

She stared at him, and slowly nodded. "All right, give me a couple minutes to get dressed." Her parents would be angry with her but if Sasuke-kun needed her she had to go.

---

Dressed in her normal red and white outfit she accompanied her boyfriend to training ground twenty five. Today was a day of mourning, there would be no business or ninja training today. They were likely to be the only ones here for the rest of the day. As he had led her there he had not said a word. Something was definitely wrong, though knowing him she doubted he would ever admit it. They got to the training ground as the sky was just beginning to lighten. They came to a halt and Sasuke stood there looking at her. The sad and empty look in his eyes made her worry.

"Sasuke-kun, what's wrong?"

Approaching her he touched her cheek with a single hand. "Sakura-chan, do you remember the dance at Ino's graduation party?"

"Of course, who could ever forget Hinata knocking down Ino and making out with Naruto?"

He shut his eyes and shook his head. "I was thinking about something else. Do you remember when I told you that when I finally kissed you it would mean I was ready to give you all of my heart?"

She felt her face blush and her heart beat pick up. "Uhm, yeah, I do remember that."

"Good," he leaned in slowly and his lips touched hers. After a long sweet moment he pulled them back again. "I love you Sakura." He whispered.

There was no vermalala, no outward excuse. A huge smile filled her face and she felt overwhelmed by the joy of finally hearing those words from him. "Oh Sasuke-kun I love you too!" She leaned in and kissed him and he accepted her kiss and returned it. When the kiss ended he wrapped his arms around her and held her close. She could feel his heart pounding.

"I never meant to fall in love with you Sakura-chan, it was never part of the plan, it just happened. I was thinking about who was closest to me and I realized that there was only you. You are the only one who I truly care for and the only one it would break my heart to lose." He held her a bit tighter. "Sakura-chan I need your help."

She looked up at him and saw worry and fear in his eyes. *He is worried about me! He really does care about me!* "Anything Sasuke-kun! I would do anything for you!"

He swallowed and felt his hands shaking. She was so beautiful, and he really did love her. "Are you sure Sakura? Anything? Even give your life for me?"

She nodded without hesitation. "I am kunoichi and every time I go on a mission I am ready to risk my life for my village. I am just as ready to risk it for you Sasuke-kun. I love you and would do anything you ask of me."

He saw she really meant it and slowly nodded. He leaned down and kissed her again, a passionate desperate kiss. He let his feelings flow out of him into that kiss. He pulled his lips back from hers and whispered to her. "Are you happy Sakura-chan? Are you happy my love?"

"Yes, oh yes, Sasuke-kun I have never been happier in my whole life!"

"I'm glad, I'm glad I am able to give you this." He took a deep shuddering breath. "Sakura-chan close your eyes for just a minute please."



She grinned up at him. "Why?"

"Please just trust me."

She nodded and shut her eyes. "I trust you Sasuke-kun."

He carefully pulled out of her embrace and walked behind her. He placed both hands gently on each side of her face. She could feel his hot breath on her throat. He leaned in and placed his lips by her ear. "Goodbye." And with one swift strong motion he snapped her neck.

Her body jerked and fell to the grass without a sound. He stood there and looked at what he had just done. He felt pain in his eyes, as though they were burning. He shut them and stumbled away. *I had to. I had to. I had to. It was the only way.* After a couple minutes the pain dies away and he opened his eyes. He pulled off his hitai-ite and looked at his reflection in the polished metal. His sharingan had drastically changed. He had done it; he had activated the Mangekyo sharingan.

---

They were all sitting down to breakfast when the phone rang. Kushina got up to answer it. "Hello?" She paused and listened. "Yes he is." She listened a bit more then looked to her son and held the receiver out to him. "Son, it's Morino Ibiki, he wishes to talk to you."

Naruto got up from his seat and took the phone from his mom. He was wondering what the head of the ANBU's torture and interrogation unit could want with him. "Hello, this is Naruto." He listened. "Now? But... I see, no that's fine I'll be right over." He hung up. He looked at everyone. "I have to go. Apparently they need my help to bring pressure on someone who was plotting to attack me."

Kushina frowned. "Damn it! Are there still idiots like that even now?"

Naruto grabbed an apple as he headed towards the door. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Niisan you're leaving?" A slightly upset Alysa asked.

"He has to," Saishu explained. "A ninja must be ready to serve whenever his village needs him."

Naruto smiled. "Don't worry imouto I'm sure I'll be back before too long."

---

It was a bit unusual to receive requests for help directly from the ANBU, but hardly unheard of. It was a bit odd though that they were asking him to go to training ground 44 rather than ANBU headquarters. He wondered in they were using the Forest of Death as a way to bring additional pressure on whoever it was they were interrogating.

It was still early enough for the streets to be nearly empty. Naruto raced over the rooftops wanting to get there quickly and also quietly. Though many people might be surprised to know it October 10th was a day of mourning for his family just as it was for a great many others. To his mind October 9th was his birthday. October 10th was the anniversary of his father's death. He and his mother would make an offering in his memory in the family chapel. Later his mother would go to the cemetery and place a single rose upon his grave. (Naruto did this on other days, but not on the tenth of October.) He hoped that whatever his part was it would be over quickly and he would soon be home again. No matter how things had changed he would prefer for people to not really notice him on this day.

---

Ibiki was alone waiting for him just outside the main entrance to training ground 44. Naruto landed about twenty yards away facing him and eyeing him warily.

"Thank you for coming so promptly. We have some things to discuss." A gruff voice said.

Naruto nodded. "We sure do. Why don't you drop the henge first though Sasuke?"

Ibiki looked at him and smirked before disappearing in a puff of smoke. Sasuke stood there in his normal dark blue jacket and khaki shorts. Naruto noticed his eyes were red. "Not bad Naruto, how'd you know?"

"I can read your chakra signature." His hand drifted to his belt but he did *not* press the send button on his radio communicator. If he called in his mom the clans would automatically get involved. He didn't want to drag everybody into this if it was just another stupid challenge from Sasuke.

The dark haired boy nodded. "I would have shown you who I was anyway but it's good that you figured it out. This is the way it should be Naruto, you and me face to face. I don't really want to ambush you; I want to beat you down in a straight fight."

Naruto sighed. "So is that what this is? One more stupid challenge? He shook his head. "We're not academy students anymore Sasuke. We're ninjas of Konohagakure. Don't you think it's time to put an end to childish fights?"

"I couldn't agree with you more Naruto. Let's bring all our fighting to final end, here and now."

"Well that sounds a bit ominous." His finger switched his radio to send. "So Sasuke just why have you brought me here to the Forest of Death?"

Sasuke smiled. "That won't help."

"Huh?"

From behind his back Sasuke took out a device about the size of a brick with a couple of antennas sticking out of it. "I have a short range jammer. Your whore of a mother won't be saving you."

Naruto glared at the boy and clenched his fists. Sasuke's smile widened as he felt a wave of killer intent coming at him. " *What* did you just say you Uchiha bastard?"

"I said that filthy red headed foreign whore isn't going to save you. You're going to die here monster. I've read all the secret files on you. I know all about your red chakra and your healing ability and about all the people who protect you, including the Hokage. But *none* of that is going to save you. Against the power of my sharingan you are helpless."

"I've faced the sharingan before teme. I've sparred against Kakashi at least a dozen times while he was using it." He slowly and deliberately pulled out his katana. "If you're serious about this bastard then I really will kill you, even with your sharingan."

"You've never faced this power before." Sasuke sounded smug and secure. "I don't have an ordinary sharingan. What I possess is the sharingan's final and ultimate form, the mangekyo sharingan."

Naruto snarled. "I don't give a damn if it's the double super secret sharingan. You've never been a match for me Sasuke and you never will be."

Sasuke activated his curse seal and let all of its power flow into him. He was finally ready. "If you really believe that monster then come prove it."

## Everything changes Part 2

**Author's Note:** Thanks to everyone who reviewed and gave me their opinion. I have decided to go ahead and keep the story under one title for the time being. Hopefully the sheer number of reviews will be enough to convince new readers to give it a try. Now just one point about the story. Some of you may not like how I have the mangekyo sharingan work. Here is my theory, I think each time the mangekyo is activated it provides its user with a unique power. Kakashi's ability is radically different from Itachi's so it seems to reason that Sasuke's would be radically different from either. Now since Sasuke never killed his best friend in canon I don't think he ever activated his mangekyo. Even if he some how later did and the power was something other than what I have given him let's just call it the effects of being an AU and leave it that. Hope you all enjoy.

---

Naruto gladly accepted the challenge and rushed forward with his katana held high. He regretted the problems killing Sasuke would cause for his mom and godmother, but for wanting to attack him and for insulting his mother Sasuke was a dead man. He would get no mercy. Naruto had faced the sharingan and knew its hidden weakness, speed. He also knew from countless spars that he was faster than Sasuke. This was a deadlier repeat of the schoolyard challenge so many years ago. Once again Sasuke was challenging him and expecting to beat him solely because he was an Uchiha. As Naruto closed in on him he could see the black marks across his skin and feel the strange chakra, but had no doubts that his katana would cut him down.

Then Sasuke disappeared. One instant he was right in front of him and the next he was gone. The instant after that a fist slammed into his face and sent him flying. He landed about thirty yards away with an aching jaw. Looking up he was surprised to see Sasuke still standing near his original spot still smiling at him. *What amazing*

*speed! I never even saw him move!* It was reminiscent of Lee in the Chunin exams.

"Have you been training with weights?"

Sasuke chuckled and shook his head. "Weights are for losers like Lee who need them. I told you monster; against my sharingan you are powerless."

"Don't get arrogant Uchiha bastard! I have a lot more than one way to kill you!" He drove his sword into the earth and began making hand signs. " **Blades of Wind Technique.**" Naruto wouldn't be holding back. He wasn't really surprised to watch as Sasuke avoided the attack. Itachi had managed to do the same. He had used the jutsu more to test Sasuke's ability than in hopes of killing of him. It did surprise him to see how easily he avoided it; he didn't even seem to be moving very fast. Frowning he used his next jutsu. " **Shadow Clones Technique.**" Two hundred clones came into existence.

Sasuke smirked and seemed anything but worried. "Shadow clones huh? Remember the first time you showed me this jutsu?"

Naruto nodded. "Sure, it was the first day at the academy and you were being just as arrogant then."

"Is it arrogant if you can back it up? Go on and attack me, let me show you my real strength."

"It's your funeral." The clones all pulled out wakizashis and charged forward. Naruto watched as the first wave leapt at him... and slowed down until they were almost standing still. As the clones got within about five yards they seemed to go into slow motion. Sasuke, moving at a normal pace, had no problem hitting them and destroying them. As the clones were destroyed he got their memories. To each one there had been no change in velocity; rather Sasuke had seemed to suddenly disappear and move like a blur. In swift order all the clones were destroyed.

With the clones gone Sasuke turned towards Naruto and began rushing towards him. "Do you finally understand what you're up against?" Naruto had gotten set to fight but as soon as Sasuke got within five yards he seemed to disappear. Naruto felt a dozen punches crash into his ribs and chest and his nose being flattened in a shower of blood. He had absolutely no way to defend himself and no time to even try casting a jutsu. He found himself on the ground.

Sasuke stood about seven yards away gloating and reveling at his power. He was remembering every humiliation, every defeat, and every moment of self doubt he had suffered because of his hated enemy. All of them washed away now. As he'd always known the *true* power of an Uchiha was more than a match for anything. "It was worth it." He declared. "It was worth killing Sakura to get this power."

Despite his pain Naruto looked up at the boy in shock. "What did you say?"

Sasuke smiled down at him. "I killed Sakura. How did you think I was able to acquire this power? Hard work?" He shook his head merrily. "To unlock the power of the mangekyo sharingan you must suffer intense grief, the sort of grief that comes from killing your best friend. I don't really have a best friend so instead I killed the girl I loved."

"You loved her? You loved her and you killed her?" Sasuke nodded. "And you did it just to get power?"

"That's right; I did it to get the power I needed to kill you."

For just a moment he tried to imagine doing such a thing to Hinata. He sent the Uchiha a look of utter disgust and loathing. "You're the monster here Sasuke not me."

Sasuke glared at him and moved. All at once Naruto seemed to be getting hit by a hundred fists all over his face and body. Naruto coughed up blood and spat out a couple teeth as he could do nothing but take the beating. His entire body in pain he was lifted into

the air and slammed into a tree. He cried out and crumpled to the ground beaten and bloody.

"Shut up!" Sasuke screamed at him. "You're the monster! It's all because of you! It's because of you that niisan killed father. It's because of you people didn't give me the respect I deserved! It's because of you that I had to ki... that I had to do what I did! You're the one to blame for all of it!"

Naruto tried to laugh but it came out a choking wheeze. "You sound angry." Naruto gasped. "Good, 'cause I'm angry too." Naruto looked at Sasuke with slitted red eyes. He could feel something dark and terrible coming to life.

The sight of Naruto's eyes reminded Sasuke of just what he was toying with. It also told him it was time to end things. " **Dragon Fire Technique.**" It was the only fitting end for the Kyuubi, to be consumed in fire. Out of his mouth he spat a white hot inferno. It completely engulfed the monster who let out a howl that was quickly cut off. Out it poured like his hatred consuming Naruto and all the trees and grass around him. When it finally halted there was a large blaze right in front of him. Naruto had been completely consumed. Sasuke nodded, it was over, and in the end even the Kyuubi was no match for an Uchiha. "Burn now and burn in hell." He turned away from the Kyuubi's funeral pyre. Now he had to escape Konoha. He would be a missing nin. He hadn't thought much about the future beyond the fact that he would have to track down and kill Itachi.

"Sasuke."

The boy froze. He turned around. "No, no, no, it can't be."

Out of the still white hot fire he watched a figure rise and come forward. What he saw *couldn't* be alive. There wasn't any skin. Every inch he could see was blackened. The once blonde hair was ash and the clothes had been burned completely away. On the forehead Sasuke could see a partly melted hitai-ite *fused* in place. The arms and legs hung there loosely in mid air. The entire body was held up



by a swirling mass of red chakra, from the back of the mass Sasuke could see three distinct tails. It had to be a corpse. No one could be burned like that and be alive. It wasn't possible! But as the terrified Uchiha watched the eyes slowly opened. The red eyes that were there were oh very much alive and they were overflowing with hatred.

" **SASUKE!!**" Ten red arms shot out of the mass and came for him. Sasuke was a bit shocked that he couldn't read their movements. They would have crushed him before he'd even taken a step but they slowed to a near halt when they got in the range of his sharingan. Leaping away he knew just what those arms would do to him if they got a hold of him. Instinctively he knew he had to run if he wanted to live. Leaping the twenty foot metal fence with ease he escaped into the Forest of Death.

Naruto was drowning in agony. The pain was too much for him to fight and he could not keep conscious control of his actions. The red chakra had come in time to save him but not in time to spare him being burned up alive. In a fiery haze there was only one thought in Naruto that held out and demanded action. *Kill Sasuke*. In his fury and his horrible pain that was all that was left in his mind. A total and complete need to kill. Answering this demand a fourth tail emerged out of the chakra.

---

They heard it.

All of them.

Every single person in the village of Konoha heard it. An animalistic howl of fury and rage.

Along with the howl every person from the Hokage to the academy students who could wield chakra felt a monstrous chakra emanating from training area 44. Those ninja who were old enough recognized the chakra from the night thirteen years before. It was a bare fraction

of what it had been then, not even a hundredth the power, but they all knew it was the Kyuubi's chakra they felt.

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"Naruto!!" Kushina screamed. Haku and Saishu looked at her in confusion. They could sense the chakra but had no idea what it meant.

"What is it Kushina-sama?" Haku asked worriedly.

"Haku, uncle come with me! Alys stay here until I come back!" She raced out the door without giving anyone any chance to say a word.

---

Tsunade and Jiraiya were having yet another argument in her office when they both felt and heard it. "Oh kami! It can't be!" She looked at Jiraiya in panic. "I thought you said the seal was in no danger of failing!"

"Seal? What are you talking about?" He'd not been in Konoha that night thirteen years ago.

"That's the Kyuubi's chakra!"

Jiraiya's face went pale. "No! That's impossible! I'm sure it could not have failed!"

Shizune popped her head in the office. "Lady Tsunade! That chakra..."

"I know!" Tsunade snapped and grabbed Jiraiya by the arm. "Come on we're going to where ever that chakra is! Shizune get every last ANBU moving there now!"

---

"Father what is that?" Hinata asked him.

He swallowed. "I fear that is Naruto."

"Naruto?!"

"Stay here Hinata."

"No!" She gave her father a look that said she was coming no matter what.

Hiashi stared at his daughter, both pleased and angered by her defiance. "Very well, you are ninja after all and a worthy heir. Come and see the truth."

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"Stay calm children there is nothing to be afraid of!" Iruka called out to his students. He looked westward to where the chakra was coming from. He didn't know for certain what it was but he had a strong suspicion. He prayed he was wrong.

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"All of you come with me!" Riyuki shouted. He had gathered together every last Uchiha ninja, including his daughter. But for some reason Sasuke was missing. As a group they headed towards training ground 44.

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Damn near every Konoha ninja was rushing towards the spot where they felt the Kyuubi's chakra. Only those like Iruka who were on duty refrained. As they began to arrive they saw a fire and the signs of a battle. They also saw a large gap in the fence had been torn open. Before Tsunade even had a chance to bring them into order hundreds had gone into the forest. Such a powerful chakra was as easy to track as a bonfire in the middle of the night.

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"Kai!" He shouted. The hundred explosive notes he set as a trap went off as one directly under the monster. But the monster kept coming without even seeming to notice the massive explosion. The monster seemed like a human sized fox with four tails made of chakra. He'd thrown streams of fire and giant boulders of

concentrated fire at it all to no affect. He'd tried a genjutsu and it had been worthless. He'd been running for his life trying to escape the monster, but no matter what trick he tried it stayed right behind howling at him. It wasn't Naruto anymore; it was the monster in its real form. The only reason he had lived as long as he had was due to the fact that his sharingan had slowed the attacks enough for him to momentarily escape time and again. But now he was running out of chakra. He wondered if the mangekyo might have been more effective against the Kyuubi if he'd only had more time to develop it. He would never know.

As he fled through the trees he hit his limit and the curse seal bit down on him. He crashed into the ground and could barely move. From behind him he heard the monster's howl. Bitterly he turned around to face his death. In the end he had not been strong enough. As the monster's claws reached for him he had time for a last thought; *I'm sorry Sakura.*

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"Oh kami!" An ANBU in a falcon's mask said as he came upon the scene. He was the very first to arrive but others who quickly filled the area whispered agreement. There before them was a miniature Kyuubi with four tails. And scattered around it were *pieces* of some unknown ninja. There was no head to be seen so it was impossible to know who the Kyuubi had just shredded. But like a cornered animal the Kyuubi had turned to face them and seemed to be getting ready to attack. More and more leaf nins poured into the area. All of them with enough sense of self preservation to keep a safe distance and not provoke what was before them.

"Get back all of you!!" Tsunade shouted as she finally arrived. She turned to Jiraiya. "What's happened to him?"

Jiraiya stared. "I think he must have been driven to such a rage that he lost some control over the seal." He swallowed. "This form is not the Naruto we know." He had been very careful to speak just loud enough for her to hear.

Tsunade paled at the implication. "Does that mean the Kyuubi's in control?"

"No!" He answered sharply. "If this were the Kyuubi we'd be under attack. My guess is that it's some combination of the two psyches."

"Which one is stronger?" Tsunade asked nervously.

A growl emanated from the four tailed being and one menacing step forward was taken. Jiraiya looked nervous. "I think we're about to find out." As the ninjas watched and tensed three of them ran forward towards the four tails.

"Stop!" Tsunade shouted.

Ignoring Tsunade's call Kushina came to a halt directly in front of her transformed son. She was only a few feet from him and in easy reach of those claws. Standing just behind her were Saishu and Haku. They were all within easy reach and none of them had any weapons drawn.

Kushina help out her arms and looked up at him pleadingly. "Naruto-kun please stop this! You must stop now!"

The four tails halted and looked down at her.

"Let your anger go Naruto-kun! Please just stop and let go of your anger!" Kushina called out desperately.

Another ninja broke away and came to Kushina's side. "Please listen to her Naruto-kun!" Hinata cried out. "Please stop now and don't hurt anyone!"

The four tails focused on the both of them and then, in a very human gesture, nodded. Like a weary dog the four tails simply lay down and rested head upon arms. As they all watched with relief the tails, one by one, began to shrink and disappear. The red chakra slowly dissipated. Kushina gasped as she saw her son's body. Mercifully he

was unconscious now or else he would have been screaming. On his forehead the metal section of his hitai-ite seemed to have been melted into the flesh. Her son's body was bloody red except on the back and legs that seemed to be burned black.

"Tsunade!!" she screamed as she knelt before her son and began pouring healing chakra into him.

Tsunade, Shizune, and Jiraiya were quickly at her side as were Kiba and Kakashi once they arrived. Tsunade was pouring her chakra in along with Shizune. "He's going to be all right." Tsunade assured everyone.

"Too bad."

Kushina and Tsunade both looked up from Naruto to glare but had no way of knowing just who had said that. But from the looks on hundreds of faces it was clear that many agreed with the sentiment.

"How dare you say that!" Kushina shouted. "My son is a hero!"

"Your son is the Kyuubi!" A nameless voice in the crowd shouted back, and many heads began to bob up and down.

*Oh no it's begun all over again!* Kushina thought with an aching heart.

"Enough!" Tsunade shouted. "The danger is now over; all of you who are not ANBU leave here now." She took a deep breath. "I am calling an emergency meeting of the Council in one hour."

---

In Naruto's bedroom they all looked down at his sleeping form. Along with Saishu, Haku, Hinata, Kiba, and Kakashi they had been joined by Shikamaru, Chouji, and Lee. Alysa sat quietly in a chair near his bed looking at him worriedly.

"Thank you all for coming to look after him." Kushina said. Since his injuries were not life threatening she had insisted on returning him home rather than to the hospital. "I have to go to the tower to attend the meeting, please stay with him, and if any one tries to break into the mansion kill them."

"Kill them?" Chouji asked in surprise.

Kakashi, Saishu, Haku, and Hinata all nodded. "I hope it doesn't happen but some people may want to attack him because of this." Kushina sighed. "If you want to leave now I'll understand."

Chouji shook his head. No one made to leave.

"Go to the meeting niece." Saishu said in a calm tone. "No one will harm him I promise you."

She smiled relieved. "Thank you uncle, and thank all of you."

---

In the hour's time prior to the meeting a great deal of evidence had come to light. A tearful and broken Mikoto had arrived with a letter. It had been a farewell written by Sasuke in which he acknowledged his intention to kill Sakura and Naruto. He declared he was acting of his own accord and that his uncle and clan head had directly ordered him to not harm Naruto. In the meantime the body of Haruno Sakura had been discovered. Inuzuka Tsume personally vouched for the fact that Sasuke's scent had been both at the scene of death and in her bedroom. All this had the effect of silencing Uchiha Riyuki. It was now clear that Naruto had killed Sasuke in self defense.

"Therefore no charges can be filed against Naruto." Tsunade said. She wanted to get everyone's agreement and wrap up the meeting as quick as possible. "I am glad that this has been settled."

"I beg your pardon Hokage-sama," Koharu spoke up. "But you cannot ignore the matter of the Kyuubi."

"The physical well being of Naruto is not a matter for the council."  
Tsunade replied stiffly.

"Respectfully Hokage-sama, I must disagree." Aburame Shibi spoke in a clam and disinterested tone. "It seems only logical that anything that would panic the entire ninja population of this village should be discussed." Tsunade's heart sank that it was Shibi who had said that. He was a logical and reasonable member of the Council. If he felt that way a number of others likely did as well.

"We can't ignore the fact that the Kyuubi nearly broke free today! Whatever the reason, even if it was self defense the potential danger is too great to ignore!" Yamanaka Michio spoke up. Inoichi likely would have felt differently, but Michio look determined to argue.

"The fact that Naruto did not commit murder does not make his actions any less worrisome." Danzo spoke up. "Clearly he needs greater care than he has received. If he were placed in the ANBU we could both keep an eye on him and give him training in emotional control."

"You'd like to turn him into a typical ROOT member you mean."  
Tsunade said.

Danzo shrugged, he was well aware the Hokage did not trust him. "Think what you will Hokage-sama, I feel he could use the emotional training as well as the surveillance."

"No," she said flatly. "I refuse to treat Naruto as anything but a regular Jonin of this village."

"Unfortunately Hokage-sama that statement does not match your previous actions concerning him." Shibi pointed out. "Also given your emotional attachment to him as a godson you are likely to have a biased point of view."

"Something must be done about him." Koharu stated. "The village must be protected from any threat whether it be internal or external."



"Threat?" Kushina growled. "You mean like an invasion? Like when we were so recently attacked and my son *personally* broke one of the invading forces? Have you all forgotten what he has already done to protect this village? How can you talk about punishing him for protecting himself from Sasuke's attack?"

"Had he simply done that there would be no issue." Michio answered. "However we cannot ignore what happened. Are we supposed to pretend that we did not see the Kyuubi breaking his bonds?"

"Naruto would never be a threat to the village!" Kushina stated.

" *You* may very well be ready to stake your life on that, but I am not." Michio said.

"There is no danger of the Kyuubi breaking free." Jiraiya finally spoke up. He was not a member but had been invited to sit in on the meeting and give expert testimony on the subject if it was called for. "There is no danger of the Kyuubi's full form manifesting itself. As the world's leading seal master I can assure you of that."

"And what do you call what we saw this morning?" Michio demanded.

"A manifestation of the Kyuubi's four tail form. Surely all of you realize that what we saw was *not* the Kyuubi. The four tail form would have only a tiny fraction of the original's might."

"And just how much damage could that tiny fraction do?" Koharu asked coldly.

Jiraiya swallowed. "I'm really not sure."

"That answer is hardly reassuring." Shibi noted.

Kushina was getting angrier the longer this dragged on. "If *any* of you think I'll let you punish my son for surviving an assassination

attempt you're insane."

"No one here wishes to punish Naruto." Danzo stated. "Only to better control the danger he represents."

Michio eyed Jiraiya consideringly. "As the world's top seal master couldn't you alter his seal to better contain the Kyuubi's chakra?"

A nervous look flashed between Jiraiya and Tsunade. "I *could*, however were I to do so he would be much more vulnerable to *certain threats* he faces." Akatsuki and their goals were a carefully guarded secret even from the Council.

"So you're saying his safety is more important than the village's?" Michio questioned.

"No, I am saying his safety and the village's would be endangered if he were unable to draw on the Kyuubi's power." Jiraiya answered reasonably. "After all what would have happened had he been unable to draw on it during the invasion? How many more would have died? Would we have even won?"

"What you say may be true." Koharu said. "But things cannot remain the way they are. Something must be done to ensure that what happened today does not happen again."

Tsunade looked at them. Maybe half the Council sided with the point of view that something had to be done. It was clear to her that Naruto would never get the support he needed to one day succeed her unless something was done to convince them that he was not a danger to Konoha. "Perhaps he can be given special extended training to better control his power." Tsunade said quietly.

"That is what I suggested." Danzo frowned.

"Not with the ANBU, but with Jiraiya." She took a deep breath. This was not what she wanted but the way things were headed they would be worse if she didn't cut it off. "Jiraiya and Naruto could go on

an extended training exercise away from the village for two and a half years."

"What?!" Kushina glared at her friend. "You want him to go away for two and a half years!"

Tsunade looked at her patiently. "It would be a great learning experience for him and he could learn improved control."

"I refuse to allow it!" Kushina said.

"That is not your decision to make." Michio said. "He is a ninja; it is his duty to perform any mission assigned to him by the Hokage, even one of such a long duration."

"This does seem to be a reasonable course of action." Shibi stated. "It would have the added benefit of calming the concerns of both our ninja and civilian populations."

Kushina looked pleadingly to Tsunade. "Tsunade you can't send Naruto-kun away from me for two and half years!"

Tsunade shook her head slowly. "I am sorry Kushina, but as Hokage I must do what is best not only for him but for the village." She tried to sound cheerful. "I am sure that when he returns he will be stronger and more capable than ever."

Kushina shut her eyes and sank into her seat. A part of her could understand the reasoning and why this was not bad given the circumstances. But in her heart all she could think of was the fact that she would not see her son again once he left for years.

In just one day everything had changed.

## Watching him go

**Author's Note:** This chapter brings an end to the original story line. As I stated in the previous chapter I'll be keeping this under one title for the time being, though that may change at some point. I intend to write a story arc centering on characters still in Konoha and then one on Naruto and his compatriots. Then it will be time for his return home. I hope you all continue to enjoy the story.

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Naruto slowly opened his eyes. He felt tired, but there wasn't any pain. He was in his bed. It took him a moment to realize he wasn't alone. He had an angel there with him. There was Hinata-chan asleep on top of his blankets. She was wearing her usual black shirt and pants and looked so beautiful and peaceful at the moment just lying there. He turned a little onto his side, careful not to disturb her. He just wanted to look at her face. She really was his angel, his one sweet kind girl. He loved her so much and wondered how he could ever have deserved someone like her. He thought about what Sasuke had said to him. That he had killed the girl he loved to gain power. How could anyone possibly value power over a loved one? Power was worthless if you had no one you wanted to protect. Slowly and carefully he leaned in close to her. With his lips he placed a gentle kiss on hers. He watched as those beautiful pale eyes fluttered open. She smiled and he knew everything was fine.

"Naruto-kun you're awake!" She said excitedly and leaned forward to put her arms around him. "I'm so glad."

He got his arms out from underneath the blankets and hugged her too. "Thank you Hinata-chan."

"For what?" She didn't stop hugging him.

"For loving me."

She gave him an odd look. "Naruto-kun I've always loved you and I always will."

He smiled. "I know Hinata-chan. I love you too." He leaned in and they kissed. He knew that this was temporary. He knew that all too soon this perfect moment would have to end and the world would intrude into their lives once more. He knew that. So he held her just a little tighter, kissed her just a little more, and treasured this perfect moment.

---

Despite his pleas Hinata-chan had eventually gone to tell everyone he was awake. Alysa came bounding in to hug him and tell him she was glad her niisan was awake. Grand uncle Saishu also came in along with Haku. He soon learned he'd been asleep for two days. They also handed him a small mirror to show him a rectangular scar that was on his forehead. *That* had made him unhappy! Especially when they told him it would be permanent, Tsunade had already said so. When Hinata mentioned she thought it gave him more, 'character' he felt a little better. It was not long before his mom arrived with Tsunade and Jiraiya. Kushina immediately rushed to her son's side to embrace him and cover his face with kisses. Even as she did so Tsunade kindly but firmly cleared the room until only she, Kushina, and Jiraiya were left with him. With the door closed she cast a minor jutsu to prevent any eavesdropping. They took seats around his bed while he sat up in it. They had a great many things they would need to talk about.

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"What is the last thing you remember?" Tsunade asked.

"Fire," Naruto gulped. It was not a memory he liked. "I remember Sasuke burning me and pain, unbelievable pain." He thought he heard his mother mutter some words he *knew* she didn't use.

"You don't remember anything else?" Tsunade asked.

Naruto shook his head. "Nope, the next thing I remember was waking up here." He looked at his godmother. "So what happened? How did I survive?" The three of them shared a nervous look. "What? What happened?"

"We'll tell you in a little while Naruto-kun. But there are other things I'd like to ask you first." Tsunade stated.

"Godmother, while we were fighting Sasuke told me he killed Sakura. Did he really?"

A sad look entered Tsunade's eyes and she nodded. "Yes he did. He deliberately murdered her prior to meeting you. He actually left behind a letter stating his intentions to kill the two of you and taking the full responsibility for it." She sighed. "We don't know why."

"He said he killed her to get power. He had a more powerful version of the sharingan, he called it the mangekyo sharingan." Naruto frowned fiercely. "If it hadn't been for that I would have crushed him. As it was, it made him a whole lot more powerful. He said the only way to get it was to suffer a terrible grief and loss; so he killed her to get the power he needed to kill me."

"Funny how Riyuki never mentioned *that*." Kushina said darkly.

"I think I'll have him pay me a visit and see if I can jog his memory." Tsunade said. She looked at Naruto and took a deep breath. She was not eager to begin.

Naruto knew his godmother well. She never had trouble speaking her mind. He saw the looks on his mom and pervy granddad.

"Something really bad happened didn't it?" He asked in a quiet tone.

Kushina got up from her chair and sat on his bed next to him. She draped a comforting arm around his shoulders. "Yes it did Naruto-kun. But try to remember that what happened was not your fault."

A sudden panic filled him. "Mom whenever you say that it always has something to do with the Kyuubi."

Kushina slowly nodded. "It does son."

---

They calmly explained to him just what had happened. The more they told him the more upset they could see him getting.

"I lost control of the Kyuubi?" He sounded frightened.

Jiraiya spoke up for the first time. "Kid, if that had happened none of us would be here right now." The truth in those words bit hard. "That seal your dad placed on you has weakened a bit but it's not about to break. The Kyuubi *cannot* break free while it remains intact. The four tailed form that was unleashed was a manifestation of the Kyuubi's and all things considered a relatively weak one. The pain and rage you felt from Sasuke nearly burning to death must have been enough for you to bring it forth. You all ready know that your anger brings out the red chakra cloak. Well this was an extension of that but to a far greater degree."

He looked at Jiraiya. "But I wasn't in control was I?"

"A part of you was." Jiraiya tried to sound comforting.

"And a part of me wasn't. The Kyuubi got at least a little control didn't he?" Jiraiya nodded. "And the whole village saw it?"

"Not the whole village." Tsunade answered. "But most of the shinobi saw it, yes."

Naruto shut his eyes feeling tired and beaten. "And they all hate me again don't they?"

"No! They don't hate you Naruto-kun!" Kushina hugged him tight. "But a lot of them are worried."

Tsunade decided there was no avoiding it. "Naruto I held an emergency meeting of the Council and many of them were *concerned* about you."

"What you mean is they were afraid I'd lose control, of the Kyuubi again." Naruto said morosely.

"Something like that." Tsunade said. "Naruto, it was clear to me that if something wasn't done to assuage their fears that they would never support you as my successor. So I decided to send you on an extended training mission with Jiraiya."

"A training mission?"

Jiraiya smiled. "It'll be great kid! I intend to teach you *everything* I know. I consider you my heir Naruto, just like I did your father. When we get back you'll have all my knowledge. And while we're at it we'll also train you to have greater self and emotional control."

Naruto thought about it and slowly nodded. "That sounds good Jiraiya-sensei; you know how much I love learning new jutsus. Will we be back in time for the New Year?" Once again the three of them shared an uneasy look. "What? We'll be gone longer than that?"

"Naruto, it's going to take awhile to teach you *everything* ."

Naruto began to feel a little worried. "How long would it take?"

"Two and a half years."

"What?! You want me to leave for two and a half years? Can't we at least spend some of that time here in the village?"

Jiraiya shook his head. "No Naruto, I know that seems like a very long time but for the amount of information I intend to impart on you it really isn't. This time will be a unique one in your life and I want you to have as much instruction and new experience as possible.



Coming back to the village would interrupt it, and besides I want you to have the maximum impact when you do finally return."

"Forget it! I won't go!" He crossed his arms and sounded like an upset thirteen year old.

"I'm sorry Naruto, but you can consider this an order from the Hokage." Tsunade said.

He looked at her not believing it. "Godmother you want to send me away?"

She shook her head. "No, when Jiraiya first requested this I told him absolutely not. But unfortunately with what has happened it's the best option we have. If you want to reach your dream Naruto you have to do this."

"I can still be Hokage without leaving for so long." A thought occurred to him. "If it's a mission what rank are you assigning it?"

"In general all training missions are considered C-rank." Tsunade said.

He smiled. "Well I have the right to refuse any assignment rank below S-rank, so I'm refusing to go!" He heard his mother sigh.

"Son you have to go."

He craned his neck to look at his mother's sadden face. "Mom..."

"Oh Naruto-kun!" She squeezed him tight and began to cry. "Oh son you know how much I love you! You know I'll miss you every second you're away from me! I don't want you to leave me son, not for an hour, not for a minute! But you have to do this! I want you to have your dream no matter what and this is the best way."

He saw his mom's tears and felt an ache in his chest. "All right mom," he said in a small voice. "If you really think this is best I'll go."

"I do Naruto-kun, I really do."

He slowly nodded. He thought about everything he would be leaving behind. "Mom before I go there is one thing I **have** to do first."

---

*He is so handsome!* She really did think his scar only gave him more character. And she thought the dark blue kimono he wore looked very good on him. She could not remember the last time she had seen him wear a kimono. He and his mother were both wearing them which was odd. Normally they were reserved for formal occasions. Kushina had simply called her father and asked to come over and meet with them. She was even more surprised to see a slight grin on her father's face.

"It's not really a surprise." Hiashi said under his breath.

"What father?" Hinata asked.

He looked down and actually *smiled* at her. When was the last time he'd done that? "You'll see Hinata."

Naruto's eyes never left her and he had one of his huge and happy smiles. She was standing beside her father. He came over to her and took both of her hands into his. Even after all this time she still felt her heart speed up a little at his touch. "How are you Naruto-kun?"

"Scared, nervous, happy, and excited all at once." He chuckled a bit.

"Is something special going on?"

He nodded. "Yeah you could say that Hinata-chan. To begin with I'm going to be leaving the village for two and a half years."

She suddenly felt her heart sink into the floor. *He's leaving me? For that long?!* "Naruto-kun, you're going away for two and a half years?" She could hear her voice cracking. She was the heir of the Hyuga

clan and she was expected to deal with all things with an air of calm and serenity. But even with her father standing there she found that some things were too much. He was her strength and her courage, he always had been. Since their first kiss he had become even more than that; he'd become her heart. Though she knew her father would be upset she couldn't help it as she felt hot tears slide down her cheek. "Oh Naruto-kun I can't be without you for that long!" She wrapped her arms about him and pressed her face into his chest. Even if her father disapproved she needed this. Needed to feel him in her arms and to feel his arms protectively around her. To her surprise her father never said a word as Naruto and whispered comfortingly to her. After a few minutes she finally felt strong enough to let go of him and stand apart. His hands found hers again.

"It'll be all right Hinata-chan." He said in a gentle and tender voice.

"How? How am I supposed to bear not seeing you for so long?"

He leaned in and kissed her. "The same way I will, by knowing that I love you and that I will see you again."

She slowly nodded. Nothing could make this all right, but his words made it a little better. Maybe she would be able to find a way to bear it. "I love you so much Naruto-kun. I'll try and be strong while I wait for you."

A mischievous little grin touched his lips. "So you'll wait for me?"

"Of course I will!! How could you even doubt that for a second?"

A guilty look crossed his face as he saw how upset his teasing had made her. "I never doubted Hinata-chan, I was joking I'm sorry."

"Baka! This isn't a time for jokes!" She suddenly seemed to remember that her father was standing there. She looked up at him apologetically. "I am sorry for being so emotional father." Strangely he did not seem to be upset.

"That is all right daughter; I think you will be more emotional in a moment."

"I don't understand." Hinata was feeling as though everyone knew something that she did not. Naruto abruptly seemed nervous. He was looking at his mother who was standing there just smiling.

"Mom, are you supposed to ask this or should I?"

"Well son you're doing such a fine job so far why don't you ask?"

Nodding he turned to Hiashi and gave him a very deep and respectful bow. "Hiashi-san, I love Hinata-chan with all of my heart. She is more precious to me than my own life. I would always do everything possible to make sure that she was happy and secure. I would treasure her and place her before all else in my life." He took a deep breath. "Hiashi-san, I formally ask for your daughter's hand in marriage."

Hinata gasped and did something she had promised herself she would never do again. She fainted.

---

When she came to a moment later she was lying on a couch with Naruto sitting next to her. "You all right Hinata-chan?"

She immediately sat up and squeezed him tight. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

"She seems fine." Kushina commented with a little laugh.

Hiashi nodded. He still had a slight grin but was feeling the need to be serious. "Hinata."

She looked up at her father and prayed that he had only good things to say. "Yes father?"

"As you have heard I have received a formal request for marriage from the heir of the Namikaze clan. This has long been the match

that your mother and I hoped for. As such I have given my blessing." Hinata's heart soared. "However," he said seriously and she felt a twinge of fear. "If you marry him you will no longer be eligible to lead this clan. You will never be the Hyuga clan head. You must choose. I know it will be difficult..."

"I renounce my position as heir! I want to be with Naruto-kun!"

Kushina laughed. "I guess it's not so difficult." She looked down at them happily. *May you have all the happiness that Minato and I shared. And may you have it for many long years to come.* "Naruto-kun, isn't there something you want to give her?"

Smiling he reached into his kimono and pulled it out. "This is for you Hinata-chan, it's the engagement ring my dad gave my mom."

She gasped and looked towards Kushina. "I can't possibly..."

"Don't be silly Hinata-chan, it was my idea for Naruto to give it to you."

"Thank you so much I'll treasure it." Naruto tried slipping it onto her ring finger only to find it was far too large. Hinata simply took the ring from him. "I'll get a gold chain and I'll wear it around my neck until it fits."

He laughed. "Good so we'll both have necklaces."

"Well children we will need to sign the marriage contracts and perform the betrothal ceremony." Hiashi said. "Let us take care of all of this now and then the two of you shall be formally betrothed."

Taking her hand Naruto walked close by her side. She was at once very happy and yet sad as well. This was what she had always dreamed of, to be with Naruto-kun as his wife. Now she knew her dream would come true one day. But he was still leaving. She gathered her strength. She knew she would miss him terribly, that she would ache to see him and hear the sound of his voice. But she

would be strong for him. She would train hard to become stronger and be the sort of woman who would always be able to help him when he needed her.

---

An ANBU captain stood before her in her office. "You wanted to see me Hokage-sama?"

Tsunade nodded. "I did. Please remove your mask Tenzo." Nodding he did so. "I have a very special mission for you. One that only you can perform." She shook her head a bit. "One that I am afraid will take you away from this village for years."

He bowed to her. "Hokage-sama, all ANBU are the personal weapons of the Hokage. Whatever mission you feel I am needed for I will accept and perform to the best of my abilities."

"I don't doubt it. Were you present for the events that took place two days ago in the Forest of Death?"

"Hai."

"If things had ended differently I would have ordered you to use your Mokuton ability to suppress the Kyuubi's chakra. As you are the only one in the village to be blessed with my grandfather's ability you are the only one who could deal with an unexpected emergency. Namikaze Naruto will be traveling with Jiraiya and one other for two and a half years. You are to accompany them. Your mission is to protect Naruto and if necessary to suppress the Kyuubi's chakra."

He nodded. "I understand."

"Since you'll be away from the village for such an extended period of time you won't be acting as ANBU. You'll be assigned as a regular Jonin. I'm issuing you the cover name of Yamato for the mission."

"Yamato?" He mulled it over. "Hmmm, I like it."

"Any questions?"

"No, Hokage-sama."

She nodded. "You're dismissed; you'll be leaving tomorrow morning at eight."

---

The party was a last minute thing. Tsunade had decided to keep Naruto's departure quiet. He would leave and sometime later it would become known. That was felt to be safest. As such only a few people were invited, those who Naruto cared for and wanted to say goodbye to.

---

"I can't believe your going to be away for that long!" Kiba said and Akamaru barked in complaint as well.

Naruto sighed. "It's not like I really want to go, but everyone thinks it's for the best."

Kiba took a quick look around to make sure that none of the older folks were looking at them. He quickly took out a sliver flask and unscrewed the top. "Naruto," he spoke in a hushed and nervous tone. "Have a drink with me! We'll celebrate your engagement and wish for a safe journey."

Naruto shook his head but took the flask. "You trying to corrupt me?"

"Hey it's a special occasion. Now hurry up before your mom spots us!"

He laughed and took a quick swig. He made a face and handed it back. "Oh that's nasty!"

Kiba took a drink and made a similar face. "Yuck, it really is!"

Naruto laughed. "I'm going to miss you Kiba."

---

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"Here!" Kakashi proudly handed him a familiar looking orange covered book. His eyes darted about on the look out for Kushina and Tsunade. "A long journey is always better when you have good reading material."

"Everybody's trying to corrupt me tonight." He took the book and hid it. "You know I don't like this stuff."

Kakashi shrugged. "You're getting older maybe it'll grow on you." Kakashi gave him one of his rare serious looks. "Listen Naruto, there is something I want to tell you before you go. I don't normally say this, but I want you to know I am very proud of you. You are the best otouto, and the best teammate anyone could ever ask for. I know that if sensei were alive he'd be just as proud of you as I am."

With a wide smile he gave Kakashi a big hug. "Thanks niisan! No one could ever ask for a better older brother or sensei."

---

"But why do you have to go niisan?" Alysa said.

"Because I am a ninja and this is a mission."

"But I thought the Hokage liked you! Why is she sending you away for so long?"

He smiled at her sadly. "Imouto, you know I am the Kyuubi's container. This mission has something to do with that."

She looked up at him sadly but with some understanding. They hadn't known each other for that long but she had come to think the world of him. "I'll really miss you niisan."

"I'll miss you too imouto and I promise that I'll play with you again when I come back."

She smiled. "Can I braid your hair again?"



"Uhm... we'll see."

---

"Checkmate." He looked at the lazy ninja suspiciously. "Did you let me win?"

Shikamaru shrugged. "Maybe, so you and Hinata are really engaged?"

"We sure are."

Shikamaru smirked. "Worried someone might take your place?"

"Nope, I just realized that there was no one else I would ever love as much as her and no one else I wanted to spend my life with. I just wanted it to be official before I left. I wanted her to know that I was ready to make a lifelong commitment to her."

Shikamaru shook his head. "You know Naruto you've let her have too much control over you. Man it's troublesome when you let a woman have that much power."

Temari came over and took a hold of his arm. "Come on lazy I like this song, dance with me."

"But..."

"Now!" She hauled him to his feet and dragged him to the dance floor.

Naruto watched with a smile on his face. "Lucky guy."

---

Lee sat by himself. He'd come to support his friend and say goodbye. He did not feel much like celebrating. Sakura's funeral had been that morning.

"I am very sorry Lee I know what she meant to you."

Lee turned to him and bowed. "Naruto-san, you avenged her death, and for that I thank you. For that and much else I will always be in your debt. But, if you do not mind, I think I will go home now."

"Sure," he had trouble with what to say. "Lee, I truly believe that time will help. Time really does heal all wounds." *Though there are sometimes scars.*

Lee didn't really believe that but bowed again anyway as he left. "Arigato, Naruto-san, I wish you a safe journey and return."

---

Near the hallway entrance Kushina and Saishu watched as the newly engaged couple danced. "How can I be so happy and upset at the same time?" Kushina asked.

Saishu put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I believe it's called being a parent."

She nodded. "Thank you again uncle for agreeing to accompany him."

"It is both my pleasure and my honor. I will protect him with my life."

Kushina let out a sigh. "He's my little boy, it's hard to think he will be 15 when I see him again, and he'll be married not long after that."

Saishu nodded. "Given what our lives are ninja should marry as soon as possible."

"Hinata's birthday is December 27th, they will likely marry the following spring." She shook her head. "Well at least there will be plenty of time to plan the wedding." They watched in silence for awhile as Hinata and Naruto danced together, oblivious to everything except one another.

He heard his niece mutter something beneath her breath. "I'm sorry?"

She looked at him with a cheerless set. "I said it's not fair. Naruto has suffered hatred for something that was never his fault. He alone has born a terrible burden for the sake of this village, for which many have tried to murder him. Despite that his love for Konoha and its people has never wavered. He has fought for them, killed for them, risked everything for them, and how do they thank him? They force him to leave. It's not fair."

He looked at her sternly. "No Kushina it's not, but the world is rarely fair, especially not to we who are ninja. You know this. Take the joy you can and try to leave the sorrow behind. Enjoy the sunlight while you can, for night comes."

She nodded, that was good advice. For ninjas especially the night could come with surprising swiftness.

---

"Pardon me, but might I have a dance with the handsome young man?"

Naruto and Hinata were surprised to see Kushina standing there smiling at them. Hinata laughed. "I don't mind, unlike Ino I'm sure you'll give him back to me."

Kushina stepped forward and began to dance with her son. "I am very happy for you my son."

He gave her a huge smile. That smile that he'd always had even as a little child. And in that smile she felt the sunlight's warmth. "Thanks mom."

They danced for a single song and she hoped that the light would last until she could see him again.

---

It was late and all the visitors had gone home except for one. Hinata would be staying in a guest room at Namikaze, she wanted to have every minute with Naruto that she could. Though it was dark out and

a bit cold they were in their favorite spot; on a little bench in the rose garden.

"The roses have all died." Hinata said a bit sadly.

Naruto shook his head. "They haven't died Hinata-chan, more like they've gone away." He gently touched her cheek. "But they'll be back."

Looking at him she nodded. "I know, but I miss them."

They came together and kissed, and the night did not seem so cold or dark.

---

It was 8 a.m. Jiraiya, Naruto, Yamato, and Saishu were packed and ready to leave. Only Tsunade, Kushina, and Hinata were there to see them go. Everyone else had said their final goodbye.

"You had better keep your promise you old pervert." Tsunade said sharply.

"Oh? And what promise was that? I've been known to make a lot of promises to a lot of women." Jiraiya smiled.

She crossed her arms beneath her ample bosom and glared at him dangerously. "You said if I agreed to let him be apprenticed to you you'd stop that vile research of yours while you were with him."

"I did say that." He agreed amicably. "And then you said no until the Council basically forced you to it so... ow! Ow! Ow! Let go of my ear you crazy harpy!"

"You listen to me you dried up prune of a man! If my godson comes back here and starts peeping into bath houses I will find you, snap every bone in your body, heal you, and snap them again! Do you understand me you annoying pervert?" She finally let go of his ear.

"Yeah got it." He rubbed his ear. *Millions of beautiful women in this world and I have to fall in love with **her** ? I must be insane!*

"Goodbye Naruto-kun, write to me whenever you can!" Kushina gave her son a last hug.

"I will mom I promise. I'll write you too Hinata-chan."

"You had better!" She hugged him fiercely and gave him a last kiss. "I'll be here waiting for you when you come back Naruto-kun."

"Good, because you know I am coming back."

"It's time kid." Jiraiya said.

With a last wave Naruto turned and began the long journey out of the village. For most of his life he had hungered to travel outside Konoha's walls. Perhaps it was proof that kami had a sense of humor. His wish was granted and he was to be given all the exotic landscapes he could ever hope for, at a time when he wanted more than anything to stay.

Though it was hard the three women who watched him go managed to resist their urge to cry. They all wanted his last view of home to be of the smiles of three women who loved him. Watching him go they held back their tears, and hoped he would return again.

## The Hokage's selection

"Am I in trouble?" Gabrella looked about nervously. Her father had called her to his study and when she'd entered she'd found herself surrounded by five other Uchihas. Not just any Uchihas, she recognized them as the clan elders. They held a great deal of sway within the clan. She was more than a little relieved to see her father was smiling.

"Far from it my daughter. The elders have come here to confirm my decision." He looked at her with an unmistakable pride. "With Sasuke's tragic loss it has been decided that you my daughter, are the clan heir. Upon my stepping down you will be the clan head of the Uchiha!"

---

That had been last night, this morning she was heading out. She shook her head and a part of her wondered if it had really happened. She was clan heir. She held the same title that her two genius cousins had once held. Her, the failure, the one who got booted by two teams, and been given up on by her whole clan. Now suddenly she was the golden child and the hope for the future. "If I'm the hope for the future we are so screwed." She muttered to herself. Her dream had been to earn her father's and her clan's respect, which she had done. Leading the clan? That thought had never crossed her mind. Everyone had seen Itachi, and later, Sasuke as geniuses worthy of leading the clan. Well one genius was a missing nin and the other was a pile of scraps that they had buried three days ago. At the moment the clan was fresh out of geniuses so she would have to do. Walking through the Uchiha compound everyone greeted her by name and wished her a good morning. As soon as she stepped outside the compound gate though the smiles and good wishes came to an abrupt halt. She took a quick look over her shoulder at the wall and was relieved to see it was a blank white. Yesterday morning, 'murderers' had been spray painted there. The graffiti had

been covered up quick, but the message was clear. The Uchiha clan had fallen from grace.

As she walked down the street people either recognized her or noticed the clan symbol on the back of her jacket. They glared at her and muttered. A couple old women actually spat in her direction. She shook her head. Life could be truly bizarre. A few months ago these people would have looked at her with respect because she was an Uchiha. A few months ago her father and her clan refused to recognize her. Now her family adored her and the public loathed her. But then they loathed all the Uchihis at the moment.

That of course was due to the tragic events of five days ago. But strangely enough what had upset people and turned them against her clan was *not* the assassination attempt on Naruto. Oddly enough the normal citizenry had let that pass as almost unimportant. She didn't understand how people could feel that way yet they did. She thought part of that was because Naruto was the Kyuubi jinchuuriki but also partly because he was a clan heir. Somehow one clan heir wanting to kill another didn't seem to bother the public much. It was Sakura's fate that had angered the common citizenry. Haruno was a relatively new family and had no connection to any of the clans. To the citizens Sakura had been one of them, an ordinary person (even though she was kunoichi.) It was also generally known that she had been Sasuke's girlfriend for years and been devoted to him. The fact that Sasuke could be cold blooded enough to murder *her* led people to wonder if there wasn't something wrong with the entire clan.

Father had gone to the Hokage and asked that the details of what had happened be kept quiet. According to her father the Hokage had taken an almost child like pleasure in refusing his request and informing him that *everything* would be made public. Gabrella was sure that at least part of that had been simple payback for Naruto being forced to leave. If Naruto had to suffer for what had happened she was going to make damn sure the Uchiha suffered as well. That was how it looked to her dad and she had to admit it looked that way to her too. She let out a sigh. Or maybe it was simply that they had

already used up too many favors keeping everything Itachi did a secret for so long. The Uchiha clan had thrived on secrecy and look what it had gotten them.

The problem with her clan wasn't her only worry. After what had happened she had requested some time off. Kushina had agreed. But this morning she'd received instructions to meet her team at the park. Her father had told her that Naruto had left the village on an extended training mission with the Sannin Jiraiya. A chance to train with Jiraiya while seeing the world was something most ninja would trade ten years of their lives for. It hardly seemed like a punishment. Yet it had been, Tsunade had been forced to it to avoid something more drastic. She had to face her sensei knowing her cousin was responsible not only for an attempt on her son's life but also for his current status. Gabrella thought the world of her sensei and didn't want anyone else to be her teacher and role model. But she was very worried as to what her sensei would think.

---

"Hello Hokage-sama." Hinata bowed.

Tsunade gave the girl a warm smile. "Hello Hinata, how are you doing?"

"I am fine, I am still a bit sad about Naruto-kun being gone but I will manage."

Tsunade nodded, she missed him too. The village would be a much duller and more boring place without him in it. "Well Hinata now that Naruto has become Jiraiya's apprentice I've been thinking it's about time I make your status as my apprentice official. I want to start giving you some much more intensive training. You'll also be helping me with some of the teaching of my classes. Hopefully by the time Naruto returns you'll be the top medic nin in the village.

Hinata smiled at that. That was exactly what she wanted. She wanted to be strong enough to be able to help and protect Naruto when he needed her. There was just one problem with that though.



"Hokage-sama I would like to become a powerful medic nin like you. However, when will I have time to go on missions with Kiba?"

Tsunade smiled. "Oh you don't need to worry about Kiba."

---

"You want me to be your apprentice?" Kiba asked in surprise.

Kakashi smiled beneath the mask. "That's right. Naruto is out of the village and Hinata will be spending much more time studying with the Hokage. Team seven will be inactive for the time being." Kakashi shrugged. "With you and Hinata being Chunin and with Naruto being Jonin you would have gone on fewer and fewer missions as a team anyway. Now since you and I will be working together as a two man squad we'll be going out on some A and B ranks between intensive training sessions. I'll try to make sure the missions we get will be especially challenging."

Kiba's grin was from ear to ear. "Sounds good!"

Kakashi nodded. "I'll warn you though I am going to give you *a lot* of training between missions. Unfortunately I can't teach you my one and only original jutsu, it's simply too dangerous for anyone without a sharingan. But I know over a thousand jutsus and I can think of plenty that you can learn and will be a big help to you. Also, since you'll be my apprentice I'll let you sign my dog summoning contract."

"Cool! I've always wanted to do that!" On top of his head Akamaru began to whine. "Oh, don't be that way Akamaru. Of course these nin dogs aren't replacing you! You're always going to be my partner. Think of them as your back up, you know like Kakashi is mine."

Kakashi sweat dropped. "You think I'm *your* back up?"

---

Gabrella met her team at their usual meeting place, in the park by the pond. She was very relieved to see them both smile at her. Haku immediately approached. "Gabrella how have you been?"

She grinned. "I'm just fine Haku."

He came to a halt a couple of feet in front of her and just sort of froze. He smiled at her a bit shyly and held his arms stiffly to the side. "I am very happy to see you."

Her cheeks darkened a bit. Standing there in front of her Haku looked a bit awkward, something he never was in combat or in training. *He still isn't used to physical affection.* Stepping forward she put her arms around him and rested her head on his chest. His arms remained at his side. "I'm happy to see you too. You know if you want to hug me I *promise* you I won't break."

He hesitated a bit but finally put his arms around her. She thought it felt wonderful.

Smiling Kushina gave them a moment before finally speaking. "How are you feeling Gabrella?"

Pulling away from Haku she looked to her sensei. "Kushina sensei, I am fine."

"You look nervous." Kushina quirked an eyebrow. "You're not worried that I'm upset with you for the things Sasuke did are you?"

Gabrella studied the ground at her feet. "Well..." She flinched when she felt Kushina's hand on her shoulder.

"Do you really think so little of me?" Kushina asked quietly. "Do you really think I would take out my anger on you?"

Gabrella lifted her eyes to meet Kushina's "If you did I really wouldn't blame you. Not after what happened."

"Did you know what Sasuke was planning to do?"

"Of course not! If I had I would have reported him to the ANBU!"

"Then why should I blame you for his actions?" Kushina gave her a warm and reassuring smile. "You're my student Gabrella, as long as I am your sensei I'll watch out for you and do my best for you."

Gabrella let out a relieved breath. "Thank you sensei."

Kushina nodded. "Now come on I want to get a few hours of training in before we head to the Tower." Kushina chuckled. "With the Chunin exams coming up in a couple of months the Hokage is finally assigning us a third member."

"Really?" Gabrella sounded very interested. "Who is it?"

"I have no idea, we'll all find out together."

---

The flower shop's door opened and the little bell on it jingled merrily. Ino looked up from the fashion magazine she was reading. "Welcome to the Yamanaka flower shop!" Ino called out in an upbeat voice.

"Hello Ino." A girl approached the counter.

"Oh, hello Hinata-chan, it's good to see you. What brings you here?"

From around her neck she pulled out a gold chain. Hanging on the chain was a diamond ring. "I wanted to come show you this. It's the engagement ring that the Yondaime gave to Kushina. Naruto gave this to me the day before he left. The two of us are betrothed."

Ino nodded dully as she looked at the beautiful ring. "I'd heard. Congratulations, I know you will both be very happy." She managed a feeble smile.

"Arigato." She put the chain back underneath her shirt. "Ino, the reason I've come here is to try and put the past behind us and see if we can be friends. Now that Naruto has made his choice."

Ino chuckled ruefully. "Naruto-kun made his choice before I ever met him; it was always you Hinata-chan. I was just too stubborn to admit it." She came out from behind the counter and gave Hinata a quick hug and kiss on the cheek. "Honestly Hinata-chan, congratulations, I am happy for both of you."

"Thank you Ino. I also want you to know I am very sorry about Sakura. I know the two of you were close."

Ino slowly nodded. "We weren't as close as we used to be, but I still can't believe she's gone." She gave Hinata a miserable look. "That day at the academy when she threw that blood on you. I was watching as Sasuke just stood back while Naruto screamed at her. I knew from then on that he was a bastard and that he'd end up hurting her. I tried to warn her but she wouldn't listen. I knew Sasuke would end up hurting her, but I never once thought..."

"I know," Hinata said sympathetically. "Would you like to get some lunch with me?"

Ino nodded gratefully. She really hadn't had a best friend since she and Sakura had drifted apart. She hoped that the two of them might become close. "I'd like that, let me just see if mom can cover the shop."

---

They stood before the Hokage in her office. They were all curious to find out who the final member of the team would be. Kushina had a strong suspicion. She had gone over the personnel files of all the top Genin who were available. Shino seemed the best fit. He had an excellent record with many recommendations from his sensei Kurenai. He was battle tested and experienced. He had familiarity working with a sharingan user. And following the tragedy he was the sole remaining member of his squad. He seemed like a perfect fit.

Tsuande smiled at all of them before focusing on her old friend. "Well Kushina I have to say you've done an amazing job with your team."

She smiled with a justifiable pride. "Thank you Hokage-sama, I am very proud of both of them."

Tsunade nodded. "Well you certainly have a right to be. Given that they both came to you with such unusual circumstances it's amazing how you've turned them into an effective team. That's a very rare gift that few senseis have." She looked at a file on her desk. "Now as you all know the next Chunin selection examination is coming up and you'll need a third member to compete. I have given a lot of thought of just who might fit and I think I have the perfect candidate." She pressed her intercom button. "Shizune please send her in."

*Her?* Kushina was surprised by that for two reasons. To begin with since there were always fewer female ninjas than there were male it was almost unheard of for a squad to have a majority of females on it. Also she had reviewed the files of all the leading Genin candidates. There had been no kunoichi among them.

The door to the office opened and in she came, the Hokage's selection. The girl looked to be about Gabrella's age. She wore a plain tan shirt and khaki pants with a cap on her head. Long and uncombed red hair spilled out from underneath the cap with some of it covering the front of her face. Her eyes scanned the office and quickly locked onto Kushina. "So I guess you're gonna be my f#&kin' sensei, huh?"

Kushina heard gasps from both her students and an annoyed grunt from Tsunade. " *What* did you just say to me?" She was too shocked to even be angry.

The red head sent her an annoyed look. "I said, 'are you my f#&kin' new sensei' what are you f#&king deaf?"

Kushina just stared at the foul mouthed kunoichi for a moment before turning to glare at the Hokage. "Do you hate me?"

## **An old Uzumaki clan tradition**

Tsunade sighed. "Of course I don't hate you."

"Prove it, give me Shino instead of this foul mouthed little girl."  
Kushina said.

"Hey f#&k you! I'm standing right f#&king here!"

Kushina sent the girl a dangerous look. "Stop using that foul language in my presence."

Tayuya smirked and planted her hands on her hips. "Oh yeah? Why the f#&k should I?"

"Because if you don't I'll wash your mouth out with soap."

Tayuya laughed at the threat and Kushina stiffened as she sent the disrespectful girl a glare. Tsunade could see where this was headed. "Tayuya why don't you and your new teammates wait out in the reception area?"

"Yeah, whatever." She turned around and went out the door.

Gabrella and Haku both glanced at their sensei. At her nod they also left. As soon as they were gone Kushina returned to glaring at Tsunade. "What the hell is this? Who is that foul mouth and why are you giving her to me?"

"She's a former Sound ninja that Naruto spared during the invasion. She later came in and gave us some very valuable information in return for amnesty and a place in the village."

"She's an outcast from another village and you expect me to take care of her?"

Tsunade gave her a surprised look. "That could have described Haku as well."

Kushina shook her head. "Haku was different. He was always respectful and good natured. It's obvious this girl is nothing but trouble and a discipline problem."

Tsunade smiled. "Now you're describing Gabrella."

Kushina's eyes flattened. "Oh I get it! I was able to get through to one problem child and now you expect me to get through to this one?"

"Kushina you must admit you do seem to have a gift for dealing with unusual situations. Tayuya is a difficult case, but just like Gabrella and Haku she has great potential." Tsunade took a manila folder from her desk and handed it over to Kushina. "Here take a look at her file."

With a lack of eagerness Kushina took the file and opened it. She quickly scanned through the information. "She was part of Orochimaru's bodyguard?" She sent Tsunade a disbelieving look but the Hokage nodded. *If that's true the girl really must be strong.* "I see she uses genjutsu and summoning, strictly a long range type then."

"With a close combat specialist in Gabrella and a mid range type in Haku she should fit right in." Tsunade pointed out helpfully.

"That's only if I can get her to work with her teammates." Kushina kept reading until she saw something that made her stop and again glare. "She has a curse seal?! You expect me to accept a student with a curse seal like Sasuke's?"

"It has been suppressed. I had Jiraiya apply a blocking seal. I guarantee she won't be able to use it and she has been warned that if she ever does she'll be banished from Konoha."

Frowning she snapped the file shut and placed it on the desk. "I still don't want her. I'll take anyone else; give me Shino or Chouji or any other Genin."

Tsunade shook her head slowly. "Chouji is being transferred to Kurenai's squad with one other. I've already made other arrangements with all the available Genin."

"Don't give me that crap Tsunade! All it would take is your signature on a couple forms and I'm not being picky here. I'll take anyone else."

Tsunade gave her a stony look. "No, if you refuse to accept her I won't assign you anyone else. Which means that your team won't be eligible for the Chunin exams."

"What? Why would you do that? And don't give me your usual garbage about your duty as a Hokage! The fate of the village is not at stake here."

"Fine, the truth is Kushina I honestly can't think of any other Jonin sensei that might be able to handle her in time for the exams. Despite her attitude she has great potential and could be a fine asset for the village. I think she could also make a good addition to your team. Just give it until after the exams. If you still don't want her I'll reassign her and give you someone else."

"But not until after the exams?" Tsunade shook her head. "Fine, I guess I have no choice." Kushina headed for the office door.

"We still on for dinner tomorrow night? I'd love to see little Alysa and so would Shizune."

"Fine," Kushina muttered and stormed out. Being personal friends with the Hokage could be annoying some times.

---



Out in the reception area Tayuya eyed her two new teammates and had a naughty little smile. "Mmmm, maybe this won't be too bad." She sent Haku a coy little wink. Haku blushed. Gabrella however immediately stepped protectively in front of him and sent the girl a nasty look.

"Don't even think about it bitch! He's mine!" Gabrella snapped.

Haku looked at her surprised. "I am?"

Gabrella looked up at him. "Well uhm, I sort of thought..."

Tayuya laughed slightly. "Funny he doesn't look like he belongs to anyone. So what's your name cutie?"

He gave her a polite bow. "I am Momichi Haku."

"Boy you're f#&king polite! I'm Tayuya. They haven't let me out of my cage much so I'm still f#&king raw. How about you show me around the village later?"

He was about to answer when Gabrella sent him a look promising immediate pain and sorrow if he gave the wrong answer. Haku was a bit worried as he'd never had a situation like this come up before. Fortunately He spotted Kushina coming out of the Hokage's office.

"All right everyone it looks like we're going to be a team. So let's go to training ground twenty five and get to know each other." She turned directly to Tayuya. "Oh and one more thing, no more cursing. It's disrespectful to me and to your teammates."

"F#&k you! This is how I've always f#&king talked and I'm not f#&king changing for anybody!"

Seeing Kushina begin to grip her fists Haku and Gabrella took a couple steps back. "Your name is Tayuya right?"

"That's f#&king right." The girl looked at the other red head defiantly.

"Well my name is Namikaze Kushina and since I *am* your sensei I think I should explain a few things to you right now so that we understand each other. As your sensei it is my responsibility to give you my protection and to teach you all that I can. In return as my student it is your responsibility to follow my instructions and provide me your best effort at all times. Now when I tell you to stop cursing that's a command, not a request, I expect you to obey me. As of right now I do not want to ever hear any more of that foul language coming out of your mouth."

The girl planted her fists on her hips and stared back defiantly. "F#&k you! I don't give a s#&t if you're my f#&kin' sensei! I'm not changing how I f#&king talk!"

"I see." Kushina said calmly and smiled at the young woman. "How would you like me to introduce you to an old Uzumaki clan tradition?"

Gabrella had a sudden flashback. "Uhm, you might want to listen to her."

Tayuya glared at the girl and then Kushina. "F#&k both of you!"

"I will take that as a yes." Kushina said in a pleasant voice. And with surprising speed she reached out and grabbed a handful of Tayuya's hair. She yanked the girl's head down to waist level and began to painfully drag her out of the reception area and down the hall.

"Ow! What the f#&k are you doing you crazy f#&king bitch?! Let go of me bitch! I said let me f#&king go!" Tayuya howled and fought like hell to get out of Kushina's grip. Her arms flailing about and her shouts were ignored as Kushina dragged her along. Shizune, the secretaries, the Chunin guards, the others waiting to meet the Hokage, all joined Gabrella and Haku as they watched Kushina drag a still fighting and cursing girl into the Women's room.

"What is going on out here?" Tsunade came out of her office.

"Sensei is introducing the potty mouth to an Uzumaki clan tradition." Gabrella answered with a straight face.

"I see." Tsunade shook her head and went back to her office.

From the women's room they could hear Tayuya screaming and then heard her voice being garbled.

"What do you think Kushina-sama is doing?" Haku asked.

"Sounds to me like she's drowning the bitch." Gabrella answered conversationally.

Haku looked worried. "Should we help?"

Gabrella shook her head. "No, I'm sure Kushina can drown her without our help."

Haku gawked at her. "I mean should we prevent Tayuya's drowning?"

Gabrella smiled. "Hell no!"

The sounds of struggling continued for several more minutes before they finally quieted down. The door swung open and out stepped Kushina. Gabrella noticed immediately that the front of her clothing was wet.

"Sensei what happened?" Gabrella asked.

Kushina wore a grim but satisfied smile. "I washed her mouth out with soap."

Gabrella stared at her. "You're joking."

The women's room door swung open again. Out stalked a furious looking Tayuya. She looked like a drowned cat. Her hair was hanging down in wet matted clumps. Her shirt was soaked and Gabrella could see the girl didn't believe in bras. From Haku's sudden blush

she knew that he'd noticed as well. Tayuya coughed and a few soap bubbles came out of her nose.

"Now then," Kushina spoke with a deceptive calm. "Are you going to curse anymore?"

Tayuya looked ready to bite through metal bars, but answered in a small voice. "No."

"No what?" Kushina asked.

Tayuya glared at her hatefully. "No you stupid bitch!"

Without a word Kushina grabbed a handful of slick red hair and began dragging a howling Tayuya back into the women's room.

Gabrella looked over to Haku. "Let's sit down this may take awhile."

---

It was mid afternoon as they stood about training ground 25. Even with the sun out the air was chilly. Tayuya was drenched and shivering. "Damn, I'm fu... freezing."

Haku approached her. "I have a jutsu that would help. Would you like me to use it?"

"Fu... ugh, yeah go ahead!" Tayuya was having a hard time with her new more limited vocabulary. Her mouth still tasted like soap.

Nodding Haku went through a few basic hand signs. " **Water Condensation Technique.**" With the jutsu complete he touched her shoulder. Instantly the water condensed and flowed out of her clothes and hair. In a moment she went from being soaked to being bone dry.

She gave him a big smile. "That's a hell of a trick. I'm still kinda cold though." She took a little step closer to him. "Wanna fu... ugh, wanna help me warm up?"

Gabrella neatly slid in between them and gave the other girl a look that was a lot colder than the weather. "Try some jumping jacks."

Looking on Kushina sighed. This was *not* going well. "All right that's enough if we're going to be a team we need to get along with each other." She tried to lighten the mood. "Let's go ahead and formally introduce ourselves. I'll start. I am Namikaze Kushina, clan head of Namikaze. I like my son, my students, and my little Alysa-chan. I dislike anything or anyone who threatens the people I care about. My only dream is to see my son become Hokage." She looked at Haku. "Why don't you go next?"

Haku nodded. "Hai Kushina-sama. I am Momochi Haku I like my pet bunny, Kushina-sama, Gabrella, Naruto, and my friends. I dislike anyone who threatens those precious people. My dream is to grow strong enough to protect the people I care for."

Tayuya grinned at him. "You really got a pet rabbit?"

Haku nodded. "Yes, I call him Mr. Fluffy."

Tayuya laughed. "You're a virgin aren't you?"

"Moving along," Kushina interrupted. "Gabrella, you go."

"Sure sensei, I am Uchiha Gabrella. I like my father, my sensei, and my teammate Haku. I dislike foul mouthed red headed little tramps. My dream is to eventually help my clan to improve itself."

Kushina nodded. "And now our newest member."

Tayuya sighed. "I am Yokobue Tayuya, formerly of the sound village and the Sound Four. I like fighting, music, and cute innocent little virgin boys." She sent Haku a bawdy little wink. Then looked directly at Kushina. "I *hate* people who try and change who I am. My dream is to be a bad ass kunoichi that everyone respects and fears."

Kushina slowly nodded. "Well that was informative. Now Tayuya I'd like to get a feel for your skill level in taijutsu. I want you to spar with me. Come at me as hard as you can."

Tayuya however shook her head. "I'm not much for the up close stuff. I don't even carry a fu... ugh, damn it! Like I said I don't carry any kunai or shuriken." She held out her flute. "This is the only weapon I need."

Kushina frowned. "Well it looks like I'll need to give you some extra training in taijutsu and basic weapons then. From now on Tayuya I expect you to carry one full set of kunai and shuriken at all times."

"What's the point?" Tayuya asked.

"What was that?" Kushina said with a hard look.

Tayuya gulped and could taste soap. "I mean what's the point sensei?"

"The point is you can't simply rely on your primary skills to keep you safe. You should always have a last line of defense ready." Kushina stated.

Tayuya grinned. "No enemy that has ever heard me play my flute has lived."

"Really? Well I truly look forward to seeing your skills tomorrow. Tomorrow I'm going to test your full ability."

Something glistened in Tayuya's eyes. "You sure you want to do that sensei? I'm not too good at holding back. If you test me using my flute an *accident* might happen."

Kushina smiled at the veiled threat. "I'll take my chances. We'll all meet at the pond in the park tomorrow at noon. Everyone have a good breakfast, we're going to have a serious workout."

---

As they were about to part ways Haku went over to Gabrella.  
"Gabrella, what did you mean back in the tower when you said I was yours?"

Gabrella felt her cheeks darken. "Uhm, I just meant you were my teammate and I didn't want her messing with you."

He looked at her for a moment. "Was that all?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"I see." He stood there for a bit. "Does that mean you wouldn't like to go on a date with me?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Are you asking me out on a date?"

He seemed a bit nervous. "Yes I am. So will you?"

She smiled as she felt butterflies in her stomach. "Yes, when did you want to go out?"

He looked at the ground. "I was wondering if we could get dinner."

"You mean right now?"

"Well, yes, is that all right?"

In answer she slipped her arm around his. She was smiling at him.  
"You've convinced me you smooth talker. Just give me more warning next time and I'll have a dress on instead of my ninja clothing."

Haku smiled. "Next time?"

She laughed and got them moving.

---

Tayuya stood there quietly and watched them go. She shook her head and got moving back to her apartment. *He's not really my type*

*anyway. She smiled to herself. After I kick that bitch's ass tomorrow I swear I'll make her eat f#&king soap!*



## Eyes like mine

It was morning and Kushina was at the table sipping tea with her breakfast. With a loud, 'poof' she heard someone teleport into her home. "I'm in the kitchen." She called out. She heard some hopping sounds and soon an orange and black frog was in her kitchen. He had a leather pouch strapped onto his back.

"Hey Kushina." The frog called out.

"Hello Gamikichi, are the letters in the pouch?"

He nodded. "They sure are." He pulled it off. "Naruto said you'd give me two bags of chips for doing this."

She got up and went over to the cabinet. She took out two bags of potato chips. "Here you are. Listen, thank you again for doing this, I really appreciate it." She handed the bags and took the pouch from him.

"No problem, happy to help." He tore open one of the bags and began to munch.

Before leaving Naruto had summoned Gamikichi and asked him if he would mind doing some courier duty. The regular post was slow, unreliable, and vulnerable to interception. Also since they would be constantly on the move and under cover there would be no way for Kushina and Hinata to write back. By using his summons Naruto solved all those problems and allowed both of them the chance to write to him. They would also get the correspondence immediately rather than in weeks. Opening the pouch Kushina found two reports for the Hokage, one from Jiraiya and one from Yamato. They were low priority so would deliver them after breakfast. She was happy to see that her uncle had taken the time to write her. Then she pulled out three more letters. They were all from Naruto, one was addressed to her, and the other two were for Hinata.

She chuckled. "I wonder if I should be jealous."

"Huh?" Gamikichi asked around a mouthful of chips.

"Nothing." She placed a pair of letters, one hers and one Hinata's in the pouch. She also put a package in as well. "These are some cookies I made for all of them. You can have *one* since you've had so many chips. How is he doing?"

Gamikichi put the pouch back around him. "Oh he's fine. It's turning into quite the road trip for him." He made sure the pouch was secure and grabbed both bags. "I'll see you next week."

She nodded. "I'll see you next week, and again thank you."

"No problem." He disappeared with a puff of smoke.

Kushina sat back down and opened the letter from her son. As soon as she finished it she'd go next door and give Hinata her letters. Nothing could ever make up for not having him home. But Kushina took great comfort in reading his words and knowing he had been thinking of her as he'd written them.

---

Temari stood before the simple wooden cross holding her flowers. Standing beside her was a quiet and respectful Shikamaru.

"We can stay for as long as you like." He told her.

She nodded. "Thank you. It was very kind of Jiraiya to come back here after the battle and do this for someone who was an enemy."

"Well according to Naruto Jiraiya has some questionable morals, but no one has ever doubted his honor."

She turned to look at him with a grateful smile. "I also really appreciate you getting permission from the Hokage for me to come here."

He shrugged. "It was no big deal."

"No," she said seriously. "It was a very big deal." She leaned forward and gently kissed his cheek. She thought it cute the way he blushed. Taking a step forward she knelt down just before the plain cross. She laid down the flowers. "Hello Gaara."

---

Kurenai stood in the middle of training ground 7. She didn't think she belonged here. Following the tragedy she'd gone to the Hokage and asked to be removed as unfit for her current position. It was obvious she didn't know how to be a Jonin sensei. She had seen the signs, Sasuke's personnel file was filled with negative comments and demerits, but there was also praise and commendations. She had seen the problems and acted on them, but not decisively enough. Sasuke had been over emotional and a bit insubordinate at times but he had never crossed the line. He had never done quite enough to deserve suspension or restriction. As for Sakura, she had *completely* failed the girl. From the very start she'd understood that her relationship with Sasuke was poisonous. She'd tried to warn Sakura a couple of times. When the girl refused to listen Kurenai decided to allow her to learn from her own mistakes. She hadn't wanted to end up with Sakura hating her.

*I completely misjudged the situation. If I had been stronger. If I had been stricter, maybe they'd both still be alive.* She had gone to the Hokage and asked to be relieved. Lady Tsunade however had refused to release her from her obligations. The Hokage had told her that no one had seen what was coming and that she was not to blame for it. The Hokage still believed in her. So she would try and learn from her mistakes and do her best for her new squad.

---

When Shino arrived he and Kurenai shared their usual polite greetings. They'd had their, 'heart to heart' previously. Despite the dimensions of the tragedy Shino had dealt with it with a minimal of internal turmoil. He regretted the pointless deaths of his teammates. Yet he knew he had made an honest effort to help them, he had

done what logic had dictated. He was willing to admit that he had underestimated the trouble, but then so had everyone else. Even now he could not understand what had driven Sasuke to such an act. In the end it only confirmed for him the wisdom of his clan's devotion to logic and rationality.

---

They were soon joined by their two new members. One was Akimichi Chouji who was familiar to both Shino and Kurenai. The other was a slightly older boy with dirty blonde hair and an easy smile. To help break the ice Kurenai had decided to have a question and answer session.

"I'm a medic nin." Noval had informed them, "I'm an expert in the use of all sorts of poisons. I prefer to fight with senbons and medical jutsus. I was in a class being taught by the Hokage when she assigned me to this team. I've been to one previous Chunin examination, that was the one a year ago in Grass. I'm hoping to do better this time."

"How did you decide to become a medic nin?" Chouji asked.

Noval frowned a bit. "A close friend of mine interested me in it."

Kurenai had read his personnel file and knew who that friend was, Kabuto. She also knew Noval had been questioned by the ANBU and released. He had been one of the many people who had been fooled.

"I'm not concerned about the past." Kurenai said. "All we can do is learn from it." She saw Noval nod gratefully. "As of now you are all members of Team Kurenai. We have two months to get ready for the Chunin exams being held in Mist. I intend to work you all very hard to build up not only your individual skills but your teamwork. Let's make this a strong team where we all look out for each other."

Seeing them all nod she felt some hope for the future.

---

As was his normal habit Haku was the first to the meeting point. He liked coming early so he could feed the ducks. He had just started feeding them when he heard it, music. It was a sad tune drifting in on the breeze from somewhere else in the park. There was something about the melody, something filled with despair and longing. It somehow brought to mind a snowy little village; and a happy time that was lost. He quickly tore up the bread and tossed all of it out onto the pond. Then he went in search of the melancholy tune.

---

She had come to the park early. The bitch had warned her she'd be doing push ups if she was late. She'd found a quiet spot in the wooded part of the park and begun to play. In her whole miserable life there were only two times when she felt happy. One was when she was in the middle of a life and death fight. The other was when she was playing music. When she'd been younger she'd wanted to play for others. She wanted them to feel the same happiness and joy the music always gave to her. But the assholes never did. All people ever did was ignore her or else make fun of her. She'd learned to only play for herself. She came to the end of her song and took the flute from her lips.

"That was beautiful."

She jumped. She turned about to see him standing just ten feet behind her. *S#&t! What the f#&k is wrong with me? How could I let him f#&king sneak up on me like that?*

"What the f#&k do you want?" Tayuya demanded.

Haku looked at her in surprise. "I thought you had stopped cursing."

"Only when I am around that f#&king bitch!"

He frowned at her. "Please do not speak of Kushina-sama that way."

"Why? Are you going to f#&kin' tell her what I said and try to get me in trouble?"

"No," his answer surprised her. "However I do not wish her to be spoken of with disrespect. I do not allow the people who are precious to me to be insulted."

She glared at him. "So you still haven't told me what you f#&king want."

"I just wanted to listen to you play."

She sneered. "Is that supposed to be a f#&kin' joke? Nobody likes to hear me play."

"I do." Haku answered simply. "I am sorry if I have disturbed you, I just wanted to tell you I liked your music." He began to walk away. "It will be noon soon you don't want to be late."

She stood there for a bit and watched him go. Not sure what to think of him.

---

Training ground 25. They arrived as a group there not long after meeting. Kushina turned to Tayuya and asked her to wait while she spoke with the others. Tayuya watched as Kushina spoke to the others quietly. She could not help but notice how close Gabrella was standing to Haku. At least they weren't actually touching. Though she'd be willing to bet the Uchiha whore had been all over him last night. *F#&k! What is wrong with me? Why am I even thinking about this s#&t?* Her eyes drifted over to Haku. *I'm sure he's just f#&king playing with me like all the others.* She could remember the first time she'd met Sakon. He'd pretended to like her music too. She'd actually believed him for a whole month until she overheard him making fun of her to the other s#&theads. She could still remember the humiliation she'd felt at being so gullible.

When Kushina finished with her instructions Gabrella and Haku leapt away. "Where are those two going?"

"You'll see them again soon enough." Kushina said. "Now before I test you I wanted to ask you a few things. You were on a team before this, how did you manage to function with your behavior?"

Tayuya laughed. "Easy! We all did our jobs even if we didn't get along. If we didn't we'd be killed. That's a damn good motivator."

"And no one ever complained about your behavior or about your language?"

"I had a fat pig of a teammate named Jirobo who complained all the damn time. Lord Orochimaru didn't care so long as the job got done. As for my behavior I did what I was supposed to do and so did they. We all did our jobs. We just worked together when we had to."

Kushina frowned. "That is a very poor attitude to have within a team."

Tayuya shrugged. "It worked for us."

"Until you ran into my son apparently." Kushina noted the shiver that passed through the girl. "He never mentioned anything to me about fight Orochimaru's bodyguard. What happened exactly?"

"He found us threatening a civilian." She decided to leave out the distasteful details. "Naruto *slaughtered* my team but he let me go on condition I get out of the battle." She shook her head. "Teamwork wouldn't have helped any."

"Maybe not, but when a team learns to work together as one unit you become far more powerful." She eyed her carefully. "Why do you curse?"

Tayuya glared hatefully at her. "It's just my way!"

"But it bothered at least one of your teammates."

"So? Who cares? I'm not changing for anybody!"

"We all change," Kushina said. "We grow and we learn and we improve. Change is not a bad thing if it leads to improvement. If you are going to be a part of this squad you will have to change your behavior. If you are all alone or if you are with people who care nothing about you then you can do as you please. But if you're going to be working with teammates who care certain behavior just won't be acceptable."

"Is that supposed to mean you and the others care?" Tayuya said sarcastically.

Kushina nodded. "That's right."

"BULLS#&T!!" Tayuya screamed. "Who are you f#&king kidding? You never wanted me on your team! You were arguing with the Hokage right in front of me remember? I'm here because the Hokage made you take me. Don't try and f#&king pretend you care about me!"

Kushina sighed. "Two things Tayuya. One, even if I didn't want you on this team so long as you are on it I will care for and watch out for you, that is a promise. And two, when we get done with training today I am washing your mouth out with soap again, that also is a promise and I never go back on my word." Tayuya blanched as she remembered the taste of soap. "Now then it's time for your test and for me to teach you an important lesson. During this test I want you to act on the assumption you are a scout in enemy territory. Be ready for anything. I want you to use your full power, no holding back."

Tayuya smiled nastily. "What if I accidentally kill you?"

"Then you get a new sensei. Now get into the woods and take position, the only rule is that you are not permitted to leave the training area. You are free to use any technique or weapon at your disposal. This exercise will last for an hour or until you're unconscious."

"I guess we're gonna be here an hour then."



"We'll see." Kushina eyed her. "Get moving and find a spot, we begin in two minutes." Kushina flipped her radio to the send position. Tayuya had not yet been issued a radio.

Tayuya got moving, more than eager to get a little payback for yesterday.

---

She bit down on her thumb and worked some hand signs. "**Summoning Technique.**" Three huge malformed demons came into existence. Standing on a tree limb she put the flute to her lips. "You may as well show yourself." She called out.

Kushina leapt out of the foliage and onto another tree limb about thirty yards away. "So this is your summons? I have to say I don't believe I've ever heard of a summons that used demons."

"Lord Orochimaru gave me this ability along with the curse seal." She frowned. "I'm not as powerful as I was now that it's suppressed."

"If it weren't suppressed you wouldn't be on my team."

"Well now that would be a f#&king shame. You sure you want me to go all out?"

"Yes, otherwise the lesson won't strike home."

"It's your funeral bitch." She began playing her flute and the Doki all leapt at Kushina.

There was a specific reason why Kushina often used training ground 25. It had a lake and a great water beneath the ground. As she leapt back she worked some hand signs. "**Water Geyser Technique.**" From out of the ground three geysers of water shot up. Two struck demons while the third geyser missed. The remaining one lashed out at her with an arm extended by a pair of metal blades. Kushina blocked it with her katana but had to leap back due to its inhuman strength. Tayuya changed the tune and got the other two moving

towards Kushina again. They lashed out with arms and feet smashing the tree she had momentarily landed on. Kushina tossed off some shuriken but they seemed to have no effect even though striking their target. Kushina was forced to leap back again and again as the Doki came after her.

*Hah! I knew this f#&king bitch wasn't that tough!* She took the flute away for a moment. "Do you want to quit while you're still alive?" She could see her Doki closing in all around her cutting off all avenues for escape.

"Tayuya, you've already lost." Kushina called out.

Tayuya was about to answer when she felt a chakra signature and the limb shaking from someone landing on it.

"Hey bitch."

Tayuya turned just in time to see Gabrella punch her in the mouth. She was knocked off the tree limb and felt someone catch her before she became unconscious.

---

"This is rather disturbing." Haku said.

"Really?" Gabrella said in a friendly voice. "I find it entertaining."

They were standing by a small stream and watching as Kushina shoved Tayuya's mouth into the running water to wash out the soap bubbles that were accumulating.

After awhile she finally let go of the girl's hair and she crawled away from the older red head. "Now then, are you going to curse any more?" Kushina asked patiently.

"Not around you I'm not." Kushina sent her a dangerous look. "Uh, sensei."

Kushina sighed. "That'll do for now. As your teacher I'll be giving you a great many lessons over the next months so please pay attention. Now hopefully what you learned today includes the fact that a single individual is always vulnerable to a well organized unit."

Tayuya glared. "I thought you were fighting me alone."

"I never said that. I told you to act like a scout in enemy territory. As such you were always liable to be attacked by more than one person."

"If it were just you I'd have killed you." Tayuya said sullenly.

"No you wouldn't have." Kushina said flatly. "I could have escaped with a substitution at any time. I could have dealt with you myself easily but I wanted to drive home the main lesson; that you are better off being part of a team. I also wanted you to see that your powers are no guarantee against having to fight someone close in. Another lesson you should take from this is that if you keep swearing in front of me I *will* keep washing out your mouth. I promise you I won't run out of patience or soap."

"I really hate you." Tayuya said tiredly.

Kushina sighed. "That's fine for now, maybe that will change eventually."

"Don't fu... ugh, don't count on it." She paused and spat out some soap. "Tell me is this *really* a clan tradition or did you make that up?"

"Oh it really is. In fact I can still remember my mother using it one time on a very stupid and headstrong little girl who thought swearing in front of her family made her more mature."

"Huh, and did she stop swearing?"

Kushina smiled. "You tell me."

Tayuya stared at her not believing it. "You?"

"That's right."

Tayuya laughed a bit at the image of a chibi Kushina being held under a faucet with soap bubbles coming out of her mouth. "So I guess you were a screw up as a kid."

"You might say that," Kushina admitted. "Though I only needed to be punished once for the lesson to be learned. You're at three and counting. Now get up we have a lot more training to do today. Then after training you'll be having dinner at my home."

"I will?"

---

She was sitting at the dinner table with Kushina, Haku, a little girl named Alysa, the Hokage, and her assistant Shizune. She was feeling more than a little self conscious and the main reason wasn't even that the Hokage was sitting five feet from her.

"Doesn't Tayuya-chan look pretty?" Alysa said happily.

"She certainly does Alysa-chan." The Hokage said. She, Shizune and Kushina were all giggling. Haku at least had the decency to look embarrassed for her. (He had been a victim of Alysa's hair styling.) Alysa felt like squirming under their gazes.

Kushina had supposedly invited her to dinner in order to better know her. Yeah right, more likely it was just further punishment. She had no sooner entered the gigantic mansion than she was mercilessly set upon by Alysa. In short order the girl had dragged her to her room and begun doing her hair. Now she was sitting at a dinner table with her long red hair in braids and pink ribbons. Tayuya knew she should have fled but couldn't bring herself to be that mean to such a cute little girl.

Tayuya sighed, well the food had been really good and at least the Uchiha bitch wasn't around, she'd had to attend a family dinner. *Well at least the worst is f#&king over* Tayuya thought.

Alysa looked over to the head of the table where Kushina was seated. "Kaasan can I ask you something?"

Kushina smiled. "What is it honey?"

"What does f#&k mean?"

Conversation at the table came to an abrupt halt as all eyes focused first on Alysa and then on Tayuya.

Kushina stood up from the table and Tayuya knew she was doomed. In short order Kushina had her hand wrapped around a number of braids and was dragging Tayuya towards the bathroom. Tsunade and Shizune both had their hands over Alysa's ears as Tayuya howled like a foul mouthed banshee.

"F#&K! F#&K! F#&K!"

"Tayuya stop cursing!!" Kushina screamed at her as she kept dragging her along.

"Why?! I'm getting punished anyway I may as well get my f#&king money's worth!"

In short order Tayuya was once again involved in the dreaded family tradition. The Uzumakis were truly a frightening bunch.

---

Not long after Tayuya stormed out of the mansion sincerely hoping to never lay eyes on it again. *I risked my life and came here for this s#&t?! I should just f#&king leave. It's not like there will be anymore hunter nins coming after me now that Orochimaru is dead.*

"Tayuya please wait!"

She turned around to see Haku coming out the door following her. She made sure Kushina was nowhere in sight. "What the f#&k do you want?"

He halted in front of her and seemed unhappy. "I'm sorry for what happened, but why did you curse in front of Alysa?"

She was furious that he would even ask her that. "I said f#&k one time! It was when she showed me what my hair looked like! It just came out! I wasn't f#&king planning on it!"

Haku frowned. "Even so, you should not have said it."

"F#&k you! You f#&king virgin!" She screamed and stormed off.

Well she tried to storm off. Haku however remained by her side. She leapt past the gates and began racing across the roof tops. But she couldn't shake Haku. She was sorely tempted to take out her flute and stick him in a genjutsu, but with her luck that would get her arrested by the ANBU. Sick of having him act as her shadow she came to a halt on a roof top near her apartment.

"Stop f#&king following me! What the f#&k is wrong with you?"

He came to halt near her. "I just wanted to let you know that it's because she cares."

She stared at him and at his cryptic message. "What the f#&k do you mean?"

He looked at her seriously. "Kushina-sama everything she is doing she is doing to try and help you. She cares and wants you to change for the better."

"Oh f#&king right! She cares about me? What a load of s#&t!! She probably just gets off on humiliating me! She's just a f#&king bitch!"

"Do not call her that."

She glared angrily at him. "I'll call her whatever I f#&king want to!"

"No you will not." Haku said in a low and earnest tone. "You will not disrespect her, especially when she is trying to aid you."

"Oh yeah? What will you do about it huh?"

"Inflict pain on you." Senbons appeared in both hands. "I do not wish to do that, but I will **not** stand here and allow you to insult her."

Tayuya let out a mocking laugh. "Ooh, the big bad bunny boy is going to f#&king hurt me. Don't f#&king make me laugh. It takes balls to do something like that."

"I have done far worse."

"Like f#&king what? Kill someone?"

"Yes," he answered quietly. "I have killed."

The laughter slowly faded away. She could see his eyes and the manner in which he spoke. "You really mean it don't you?"

They stood there in silence for a moment. "I wanted to come and tell you that Kushina-sama cared about you because you have the same eyes as I had before Zabuza-sama saved me. Your eyes are filled with loneliness and despair. It was in your music too, that's why I was drawn to it."

"F#&k you," she'd meant it for a shout, but for some reason it had come out as a whisper. She shook her head. "F#&k you," she repeated a bit more loudly this time. "You don't f#&king know me. There's no way a little virgin like you could understand."

"I have not always lived here with Kushina-sama. You do not know me either Tayuya. But I do know the pain of being alone and unwanted by anyone." She let out a little gasp. He decided he'd said enough and turned to go. "I will see you tomorrow for training. Goodnight."

"Haku."

He turned back again. "Yes?"

She looked down feeling stupid and weak for what she was about to say. "My apartment is near here. I don't have tea but I can offer you a sandwich."

He could see this was hard for her. He decided to make it a bit easier. "I would like that Tayuya."

She nodded. "Come on then."



## A quiet talk

"It's a nice apartment." Haku said politely.

It was funny how having a guest suddenly made her self conscious of the mess everywhere. "Thanks," she mumbled as she began picking up clothes from off the floor. "I wasn't expecting company. I'm sorry for the mess." *Why the f#&k am I apologizing to him? It's my f#&king apartment, I can keep it however I want!* Yet she couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed that it was such a mess. "Do you want to sit down?"

"Sure." He sat down on the couch. Her apartment was a small one bedroom. The living room had a couch, table, and a couple more chairs.

"Do you want a sandwich? I don't really have anything to drink but water right now."

"I am fine, but thank you."

She tossed a bunch of clothes into her bedroom and quickly shut the door. She then came back out and sat down on the couch next to him. The two of them sat there for a bit just looking at each other.

"Why do you swear so much?" Haku suddenly asked.

She frowned at him. "Are you here to tell me how to f#&king talk? 'Cause if you are you can..."

He suddenly stood up and bowed to her. "I am sorry Tayuya if I offend you. It was not my intent. Truthfully I was simply curious why you talk so. I have never heard anyone else speak in a similar manner."

She stared at him, and a little grin touched her lips. "Why are you always so polite? I've never heard anyone talk that way." She

motioned for him to sit down again.

"I don't know, it was how I was raised I suppose. My parents were kind people and they taught me to always be polite and courteous to others. When I... had to leave them I was already in the habit of speaking the way that I do. Zabuza-sama encouraged me to maintain a polite persona as an aid in deceiving others."

Tayuya nodded in a bit of sympathy. "Your parents forced you to leave?"

He swallowed. "In a manner of speaking. What of your parents?"

She shrugged. "My mother was a drunken whore who always hated me. My father was one of the random sailors she f#&ked, she had no clue which one." She told him with only a little bitterness in her voice.

"I am very sorry."

She shook her head. "Don't feel sorry for me. I hate that. It happened, I dealt with it. I don't waste my time feeling sorry for myself and I don't go around looking for f#&king pity."

"I am still sorry if you never knew a parent's love." Haku said quietly.

Tayuya looked at him; normally she would be screaming abuse at anyone who said something like that to her. But the boy was just so damn *kind* that she couldn't feel any anger. "Does that mean your parents loved you?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes, and for a time we were very happy."

"What changed? If you were happy why'd you leave?"

He sighed. "It was because of my blood. I have a kekkei genkai which marks me as different. Here in Konoha I have learned that such are welcome, but in water country they were reviled as symbols of unending war. When my ability first emerged my mother, who had passed on the trait, tried to hide the fact. But my father learned of it

and he murdered her right in front of me. I was forced to... kill him and flee my village to survive."

Tayuya listened to his tale with a quiet empathy. "Whoa, and I thought my life was f#&ked up."

"If I may ask, did you run away as well?"

She hesitated, but decided that she would tell him the ugly truth. "No, she ran away from me. Some as#&ole merchant said he was in love with her and she left with him one day when I was five. No goodbye, no note, and no, 'I'm sorry for f#&king up your whole life.' One day she was just gone and she never came back. I had no other family so I was stuck in an orphanage. The other kids knew my story and they never let me forget it." She let out a dry chuckle. "Then Souta came. He was a recruiter for Orochimaru. He went through all the orphanages in Fire country looking for future recruits. He spotted me and could tell I had the potential to mold chakra. Do you know how much a human life is worth?"

"Usually between ten thousand and fifty thousand ryu," Haku answered. "It varies; I once knew a bridge builder whose life was worth ten million."

She gawked at him. "You are seriously going to have to tell me your f#&king life story." She muttered. "Well *my* life was worth a whole 200 ryu. That's how much Souta paid the orphanage manager to take me, no questions asked."

"And that is how you were recruited to the Sound village?"

She nodded. "That's right. Now I want to hear more about your story Haku."

"If you like, after escaping I made it to the village hidden in the mist. I was all alone surviving on what I could scrounge out of the garbage. Then one cold night I met Zabuza-sama..."

The two of them shared stories. He told her about his life traveling the countryside with Zabuza-sama. Of training and fighting while always on the run from the hunter nins. She told him of the harsh realities of training in the village of the sound. Of the grueling hours and hard discipline. She told him of being constantly mocked and teased and of learning not to show weakness. They both talked about the pain of being alone. As the hours passed they grew more and more comfortable with each other. As if by some strange magic they seemed to move physically closer to each other on the couch until they were almost, but not quite, touching. Their quiet talk was brought to an end when Haku finally noticed his watch.

"It is past one in the morning." He stood up and looked at her apologetically. He bowed to her. "I apologize for keeping you up so late when we are meeting in the morning."

She got up as well and gave him a smile. "I don't mind. I... really enjoyed talking with you. Let's do it again some time."

He nodded. "I would like that. Friends should get to know each other."

"So we're friends now?"

He looked a bit worried. "Are we not?"

She slowly nodded. "Yeah I guess we are. Ah, Haku..."

"Yes?"

"Do you consider Gabrella a friend as well, or is she something more to you?"

He smiled. "She is my girlfriend."

S#&t. "I see." Her face fell a bit.

Seeing that look Haku reached out and took her hands into his. This was the first real physical contact between them and Tayuya

suddenly found her self feeling a bit warm. "Please do not look sad. Gabrella being my girlfriend does not mean I do not want to be close to you as well."

"As a friend."

He looked worried. "Is something wrong with that?"

She shook her head. "No, of course not. I'll see you tomorrow Haku."

With a smile he left her apartment.

*I'm a f#&king idiot, like he's really going to be any different than the others.* Even while she reminded herself no to get her hopes up she went to bed looking forward to seeing him.

---

He entered the mansion silently and headed to his room.

"Hello Haku."

He was surprised to see Kushina in the hall near his room. He bowed to her. "I apologize if I woke you Kushina-sama."

She shook her head. "That's all right; I was waiting up for you. Though you are an adult I still would like to know where you have been."

He grinned. "I was with Tayuya talking to her and creating a bond."

She quirked an eyebrow. "You've been with Tayuya all this time?" He nodded. "And you were *just* talking?"

He had a confused expression. "Of course, what else would we be doing?"

*Oh I am not answering that.* "Haku, what about Gabrella?"

"Gabrella? What does she have to do with this? I am sure she would want me to spend time with Tayuya and become friends with her."

"Really?" Kushina said in a dry tone. "You think she would be happy to know you were alone with her until one in the morning?"

"Why wouldn't she?"

Kushina sighed. "I could tell you but it would take the rest of the night. Go ahead and go to bed. We'll be having a *long* talk over breakfast."

---

Having breakfast together Gabrella decided to just go ahead and ask. "Dad, would it be all right if I invited someone over for dinner tonight?"

Riyuki looked at his daughter over his eggs. "Well of course honey. Who did you have in mind?" She mumbled something. "I'm sorry, what was that again."

"I said I wanted to invite my teammate Haku." She saw her father grin. "It's not like that!"

"Like what honey?" Riyuki tried to sound innocent.

"Like it's a big deal, which it isn't. He and I have been teammates for a while now and I just thought it would be nice to invite him over, that's all."

Her father smiled at her knowingly. "Isn't he the boy you had dinner with the other night?"

Looking a bit embarrassed she nodded. "Yeah that's him dad."

Her father rubbed his chin. "Hmmm, you've told me about his kekkei genkai. It might make a valuable addition to the family blood line."

She turned as red as a tomato. "Dad! We've had *one* date! And he's not adding anything to our blood line!" *Well not yet, but he is a beautiful looking, sweet boy.*

"I'm just saying he might make a good choice for you... someday. Bring him to dinner by all means."

She frowned. "Now I'm not so sure I want to."

---

The practice went well. Kushina had decided to give them some basic team building exercises followed by sword training for Gabrella and taijutsu for Tayuya. Though Kushina didn't make it obvious she kept an eye on the subtle interplay between the three of them. Both girls eyed Haku and offered him smiles. They also sent each other hostile looks on a regular basis. But the tension did not turn into anything blatant and remained suppressed, for now.

Given the scream fest the previous night at dinner Kushina had expected a difficult day. But instead Tayuya gave a real effort to work with her team. She also managed to get through the entire day without cursing anyone. The most worrisome moment actually came near the end of practice when Gabrella had asked Haku to go to dinner with her and her family. Tayuya had listened to the invitation and Haku's acceptance of it. She made no outward sign but it was clear to Kushina that the girl was not happy.

Kushina let out a long sigh. This would be a very interesting group to try and mold into an effective team. *Well at least it will only be for a couple of months.*

---

A year and a half had passed.

Clack, clack, clack, clack, clack, clack, clack, clack...

*Damn it every single morning!* Feeling annoyed and a bit hung over the man tossed aside the cover of his sleeping bag. He crawled over

to the tent flap and quickly got out. It was summer time and he could already tell it would be another hot and sticky day. The sun was not quite up yet but the sky was a light bluish purple. Through blood shot eyes he could see the two of them standing on the lake going at it with wooden practice swords.

"Hey!" he shouted as loud as he could. "Could you knock it off just this once?"

"Huh?" One of the ninjas on the lake looked his way.

The other took advantage of the temporary opening to smack him on the side of the head and knock him down.

"Hey!" Naruto shouted as he got back up. "No fair! I was distracted by pervy granddad's whining!"

Saishu shook his head. His sword was up and in the ready position. "There are no time outs in real combat. If this were real you would be dead."

Naruto snorted. "If this were real I'd have made a hundred clones."

Saishu grinned. "Well I hate to tell you this Naruto but at some point you may have to depend on actual *skill* rather than simple numbers." Saishu laughed to himself seeing the boy obviously react to his mild teasing. Naruto quickly launched a fresh attack and forced his grand uncle to the defensive.

Jiraiya could hear those annoying, 'clacks' coming even faster than before. "Another day of teaching the kid to be the best." He muttered to himself. "Kami help me."



## Lessons

Jiraiya was rubbing his temples trying to relieve some of the pain. It did not help that Naruto started yelling about what a great swordsman he would be.

"You all right?" Yamato approached him with a cup of hot tea and some aspirin.

"Thanks," Jiraiya took the aspirin and quickly swallowed it with some tea. "You know this wasn't what I had in mind."

"Oh?"

Jiraiya nodded. "When I originally asked to have Naruto come with me I was planning on giving him plenty of instruction, but to have it work around my schedule."

Yamato laughed a bit. "Translation you were still planning on plenty of late nights followed by late mornings."

The Sannin frowned. "Hey, that's the way I've always operated since I started working on my own."

"Well that's the thing isn't it?" Yamato took a sip of his own tea. "You're not on your own right now."

Jiraiya shook his head. "This would go much better if it were just me and the kid."

"Do you mean for you or for him? You have to admit, Naruto has been learning quite a lot, and *not* just from you."

Jiraiya grunted, that was as far as he was willing to go. The truth was Saishu and Yamato had both taken to teaching Naruto when he was off on other, 'activities.' The two of them had supposedly been added simply to act as body guards but had taken it upon themselves to be

trainers as well. Every single morning Saishu and Naruto practiced the sword. The man was a fifth level master and seemed determined to make Naruto one as well. When they weren't practicing with those annoying wood swords the man was telling Naruto stories about the Uzumaki clan and about his mom. Jiraiya chuckled at the fact that Kushina's nickname used to be kooky. *Can't wait to see her again and call her that.* And when there was down time the two of them would often fish together.

Yamato specialized in the same Mokuton techniques that the Shodai was famous for. He could not teach Naruto those. What he could teach was the dozen different taijutsu and weapons he knew as well as a few interesting jutsus. Yamato also provided Naruto a sparring partner whenever he wanted to work on his taijutsu. Between the two of them they kept Naruto busy constantly. The kid absolutely loved it, with his energy and desire to learn he was always ready for more. Naruto really was learning more than he would have if it were just the two of them. But there were some drawbacks.

"You know I would like to sleep in late once in awhile. And it's annoying the way Saishu watches me like a hawk whenever I start telling a few stories."

Yamato smiled. "I think the main reason Kushina asked him to come with us was to protect Naruto's morals."

"Hey he's growing up! The kid needs to learn a few things."

"True," a weary voice answered from the other direction. "But some of the things *you* want to teach him he doesn't need to learn yet."

Jiraiya gave Saishu an unhappy look. "Hey the kid's lucky to have such an experienced teacher in that area. With my help he could become..."

"A huge pervert like you?" Saishu said dryly. "No thanks, his mother and I both think he can do without your, 'instruction.'"

Jiraiya crossed his arms over his chest. "Some people have no appreciation for the value of education."

"I'm going back to my cabin." Yamato headed back to the wood cabin he had created with his Mokuton ability. The other members of the party made due with tents.

"All right," Jiraiya said. "Since I'm up we may as well have breakfast and get an early start for the next village."

That had been their procedure. They had been camped by the lake for seven days. They would now move on. If they camped out they would remain for a maximum of a week. If they stayed in a hotel in a town they would stay a maximum of two days. In camp away from prying eyes they did not bother with disguises. While on the road or in a populated area they used henges and code names. They never used the same disguise or name more than once, no exception. They all understood that there were people searching for Naruto. Remaining hidden was of utmost importance.

"Hey! What's for breakfast? I'm starved!" Naruto hurried up to them. He had grown a few inches but had other wise not changed. (Except for his forehead scar.)

Saishu answered. "We have some rice and fish with hot tea."

Naruto sighed but did not complain. He had gotten used to eating a lot of fish since they had started out.

---

Yesterday.

Normally they would just use chakra to stand in the middle of the lake, but Yamato had provided them with a small row boat and oars. So the two of them had rowed out into the middle of the lake to fish together. As they sat in the boat and waited for the fish to bite Saishu told him stories.

Naruto looked at him not believing it. "My mom did that?"

Saishu nodded. "Oh yes, she was an absolute hellion as a child, especially to her brothers."

"She painted mustaches and eyeliner on her brothers with *ink* ?"

Saishu nodded. "It took them a week to finally scrub it off. Urusai really wanted to kill her for that one. He was supposed to take his picture for the yearbook; needless to say it had to be rescheduled."

Naruto shook his head. "I tried to pull a prank *once*. Mom told me that if I *ever* did it again she would stop training me."

He laughed. "Obviously she knew to nip things in the bud." He looked up at the setting sun. "All right Naruto lets head back in, we've got plenty of fish."

Naruto nodded and they rowed back to the shore. He really enjoyed fishing with his grand uncle. He sometimes wondered if his dad would have gone fishing with him if things had been different.

---

Following breakfast they packed up and got on the road. They did not leap through the trees but walked instead. It slowed them down but helped hide the fact that they were ninja. The only one who knew their destination was Jiraiya. He was a firm believer of the, 'need to know principle' of sharing information. They had wandered through most of the lands in their travels except for earth country. Currently they were in the southern part of water country. They would not visit any of the foreign ninja villages as it was impossible to enter one without revealing your true identity. Otherwise the entire continent was open to them. As they walked along they were all hanged. Jiraiya, Saishu, and Yamato were all appearing like slightly younger men. Naruto was not.

Saishu shook his head as they walked. Since there was no one else on the road they used their actual names. "Naruto, *why must you*

*look like that?"*

An apparent 16 year old girl with long red hair smiled back. "Hey we're supposed to be under cover right? And you know I'll henge to a boy when we get near a town or village, this is just for the road."

Saishu's new form quirked an eyebrow. "So this is just for our benefit?"

"Oh leave him alone," Jiraiya said. "The kid's a freakin' genius."

---

After a few hours on the road they came to a small town of perhaps twenty thousand. Naruto changed into a dark haired boy without any whisker marks or scars. They found a restaurant and some lunch then checked into a small hotel. As was their habit they shared two rooms. Jiraiya stayed with Yamato while Saishu and Naruto roomed together. As soon as they had their things in their rooms Jiraiya headed out.

"I'll go scout out the town and make sure there are no unexpected threats to us."

All three of them pointed at him. "LIAR!!"

Naruto snorted. "Yeah right! You're just checking to see where the bars are and if there's a bathhouse in this town!"

Jiraiya turned to go. "Kid you underestimate me; I already know where the bathhouse and bars are. But as we all know beautiful women can be the worst possible threat to shinobi. Therefore as your leader it falls upon me to protect us from such a threat." He waved goodbye to them. "Don't thank me, as I am happy to face such terrible dangers for your sakes."

The three of them sweat dropped as Jiraiya strutted away.

---

Despite Jiraiya's devotion to his usual, 'research' he did have time to help Naruto.

---

Naruto sighed as he added the last few brush strokes to the scroll. "There, finished."

Jiraiya looked at his work with a blank face. "Well then shall we try it?" He placed a drinking glass down on the table.

Naruto nodded. "All right." He performed a single hand sign. "**Seal.**" The glass disappeared. In the blank spot in the middle of the scroll new symbols came into being.

"Well that part worked fine. Now continue."

Naruto performed another hand sign. "**Release.**" The middle of the scroll became blank again and the glass reappeared... sort of. Instead of a drinking glass it now looked like a first grader's paper weight.

"Now that part didn't work so well." Jiraiya pointed to three lines in the scroll showing him where the mistakes were.

"Why am I wasting so much time with this?" Naruto grumbled.

Jiraiya smiled. "It takes time to be the world's top seal master. Don't you want the title that both your dad and I have held?"

"Not really." Naruto shrugged. "Besides I have a lot of trouble with this."

"That is to be expected Naruto, sealing is an art form. Tell me what does Tsunade always say about doing medical jutsus?"

Naruto frowned, he'd heard it often enough. "Medical jutsus are all about chakra control."

"Right, well sealing is all about formula. You can seal *anything* in a scroll even a house or a human being *if* you have the correct formula written. Whatever you seal *must* be perfectly represented on the scroll or else it doesn't work." He nodded to the glass paper weight on the table. "But so long as you do know the correct formula you can seal anything!"

Naruto had a notable lack of excitement at the prospect. "So? I mean all the time I'm putting towards this wouldn't it be better to study something more useful?"

"Useful?" Jiraiya stared at him.

Naruto nodded. "That's right; I mean when am I going to really need this?"

"How about if your village is suddenly attacked by a monstrosly powerful demon?" Jiraiya shook his head. "Naruto, you of all people should appreciate the real power of Fuinjutsu (Art of sealing?) How did your father defeat the Kyuubi? Even his ninjutsu was nothing compared to the Kyuubi's power. It was fuinjutsu that defeated the Kyuubi and saved the village. It was the seals that your father placed around your home and lands that helped your mother protect you growing up. It may not be as flashy Naruto, but believe me there is great power in being a seal master and it is definitely worth your time. Besides it's not like you don't work on other things as well."

Naruto considered that, and slowly nodded. "I guess you have a point Jiraiya-sensei." He took out his ink brush and a blank scroll and started over.

Jiraiya grinned. "Fine, and why don't you start calling me sensei all the time instead of pervy granddad?"

Naruto smiled up at him. "O.k., I will." Jiraiya smiled. "As soon as you stop acting like a pervert all the time and more like a sensei."

Jiraiya muttered something about annoying children and stepped back. Naruto chuckled and kept working.

---

Naruto had developed a certain routine. The day always began with sword training and it always ended with studying one very special scroll. Naruto glared at the scroll that was unrolled on top of the table. Also on the table was a stack of about a hundred sheets of paper, notes written by him. Sometimes he *truly* hated the thing in front of him. Though he didn't brag about it he was considered a genius of his clan. He had already mastered close to two hundred jutsus including about a couple dozen A-ranked and **two** S-ranked. But when he tried to figure this thing out he felt like a complete idiot.

Jiraiya poked his head into the hotel room. "How's it going kid?"

"It's not." Naruto muttered sounding defeated.

Chuckling Jiraiya entered the room. "Hard?"

Naruto looked up and actually glared at the man and his good humor. "Hard? Mastering the five dances of the blade is hard. Trigonometry is hard. Trying to figure out girls is hard. But this," he waved at everything on the table. "Is impossible!"

"Kid, there's a reason why your dad was the only one who could make it work. This one jutsu was his ultimate masterpiece; it's what made him the Yellow Flash of Konoha and a ninja legend. Even I could never figure it out." Jiraiya let out a long sigh. "I guess there's no chance that *you* could."

"What the hell does that mean?" He felt a bit angry.

Jiraiya shrugged, "Oh, well let's face it kid, this is probably way too much for you. I mean your dad was a *true* one of a kind genius. So there's no shame in admitting that you just don't measure up to your father's legacy." Jiraiya suddenly smiled as an idea seemed to pop into his head. "Though on the bright side genius can skip a



generation some times. Maybe one of your kids will be able to figure it out. Why don't I just put this away for..."

Naruto immediately jumped up from his seat and got between Jiraiya and the table. "Get away from **my** scroll! I never said I wouldn't figure it out, it's just hard that's all!"

Jiraiya shrugged. "Well if you say so." He left the room smiling to himself as Naruto returned to his studying with renewed energy.

---

They'd found a spot in the woods about five miles from the village that was isolated. There Naruto made a couple hundred clones. The paired off and quickly got to work fighting each other with wooden practice swords. A few began puffing out of existence as blows strong enough to dispel them were landed. Winners paired off against each other and kept going. The clones would fight until they were all gone. Once that happened Naruto would make a couple hundred more and do the same thing with taijutsu. They had to be very careful not to be observed. If word got out about a ninja who could make hundreds of clones it would not take long for Naruto's enemies to figure things out.

Jiraiya, Yamato, and Saishu all watched as the hundreds of Naruto's went at it.

"You know it's almost frightening how fast he learns using this technique." Yamato commented.

Saishu chuckled. "I know what you mean. He takes everything we show him in the morning and refines it. He does about a month's worth of training in an hour. The only limit is the amount of memories he can absorb at one time. But even with that..."

"He is learning years worth of training every month." Yamato said.

"Give him just a few more months and he will be the greatest swordsman who ever lived." Saishu said proudly.

"The only bad part is I don't think we'll have anything left to teach him."

"I wouldn't worry about that." Jiraiya said quietly. "I have something in mind for him to work on."

"What?" Saishu asked curious.

"It's something that his father wanted to do but could never manage. Add a wind element to the rasengan."

Yamato looked shocked. "Is that even possible? According to chakra theory combining both chakra and an element would require too much energy to be even feasible. That's *if* you could bring them together at all. How would it be done?"

Jiraiya smiled. "I have no idea. Minato could never get past the theory stage, but he might have had he only had more time. I've never been able to make it work either."

"But you think Naruto can?" Saishu remarked.

Jiraiya nodded. "I do. That kid is every bit the genius his father was. And I truly believe that he is the only one who could surpass him."

The men said nothing after that. The implications of what Jiraiya had said hung in the air between them.

*Ah kid, Jiraiya thought. You really are going to be the greatest Hokage ever.*

---

After a couple hours a panting and exhausted Naruto approached them. "Pretty good work out huh?"

Jiraiya shrugged indifferently. "Your father could have done much better." Naruto immediately pouted. "But it wasn't *too* bad. Come on there's a ramen shop in town, let's get something to eat."

Naruto immediately brightened. "Great, you're buying."

"What? Naruto you're rich."

Naruto sniffed. "So are you and the sensei always pays."

"He's right, the leader should pay." Yamato chimed in.

"It's only fair," Saishu agreed. "How many times have Naruto and I brought in dinner?"

Feeling ganged up on Jiraiya admitted defeat. "Fine I'll pay." *This time.*

---

Upon returning to the hotel the desk manager called over the hanged Jiraiya. "Sir, there is a message for you."

Jiraiya took the sealed note and headed up to his room. Even as he trained Naruto he remained the head of a vast spy network and those responsibilities could not be ignored. He had handful of trusted agents who could get a message to him if necessary. They would not have sent him something unless it were urgent. Alone in his room he read the note.

"Aw hell."

---

In short order he had gotten the others in his room.

"We're leaving in twenty minutes so get packed. We're headed to the nearest port." Jiraiya informed them.

"I thought we were leaving in the morning?" Naruto said.

"Something has come up. We're going on an A-rank mission."

"A mission?" Naruto said excitedly.

Yamato frowned. "Why is the Hokage assigning us a mission?"

"She's not, I'm assigning it. One of my top agents is in danger of being exposed and is requesting immediate extraction. If he's caught he'll spill a lot of high level information. We have to rescue him, or if that's impossible kill him. The security risk is too great to ignore."

"Why don't we contact the Hokage?" Saishu suggested. "Maybe she can send someone else."

Jiraiya looked at them. "We can't contact her."

"Sure we can!" Naruto said. "I can summon Gamikichi and he can get a message to her in no time!"

"That's not what I mean kid. If Tsunade knew she would not only refuse to send a mission she would *order* us not to go."

Saishu sent him a flat look. "And why's that?"

"Because this mission is to Iwagakure, the village hidden among the rocks."

Yamato and Saishu both paled at that. Naruto slowly smiled.

## Iwa

"Are you out of your damn mind?" Saishu blared at him. "You want us to take Naruto into the home village of the people who hate him most? Why not just ask him to swim with sharks while covered in chum?"

"With respect Jiraiya I have to agree. Going into Iwa would be dangerous for us, but for Naruto it would be incredibly hazardous."

"Hey! I've gotten really strong, I can handle myself!" Naruto told them.

Saishu frowned at him. "You have gotten strong Naruto, but this has more to do with than just strength. If the rock nins discover you they'll kill you on the spot."

"It's not quite that bad." Jiraiya pointed out. "We're not at war with them you know."

"We're also a long way from being friends." Yamato stated. "While leaf nins aren't banned we certainly aren't welcome either."

"I wouldn't trust those bastards if they welcomed us with flowers and kisses." Saishu said.

"Being from Whirlpool you have to admit to being a little biased." Jiraiya said.

Naruto knew that was true. His mom was the same way, she *despised* the rock nins. Naruto was honest enough with himself to admit that he'd absorbed some of her attitudes. "I don't really think much of them either, but how can we refuse an A-rank mission?"

"Easy," Saishu replied. "By remembering this *isn't* a standard mission at all. If the Hokage knew she wouldn't authorize it. This is a hands mission being set up by Jiraiya."

Naruto turned to his uncle. "What is a hands mission?"

Yamato actually answered. "It's the type of mission we see a lot of in the black ops. It's completely off the books. Nothing official is written at all. You don't receive a written field order and when it's over you don't write up a mission report. Everything is done orally and there is record when it's over."

"Why would you do a mission like that?"

"So that if it goes wrong your village can wipe its, 'hands' of you and pretend you were acting without orders. It's a dirty little game that all the villages play. It lets them pretend to follow the rules they've all agreed to while actually cheating like hell. They all know they cheat but they all pretend not to know. It's a great system for the villages, but kami help you if you get caught, because your village won't." Saishu said grimly.

"I can't believe Konoha does things like that." Naruto said.

The three other ninjas looked at one another. "I'm afraid Saishu has it right." Jiraiya stated. "These missions are a part of ninja life for us as much as any of the other villages. If something goes wrong the Hokage won't be able to help us. Running missions in another ninja village is an act of war. Even if she wants to she won't be able to acknowledge us without starting a war." He took a deep breath.

"Look, I understand the extreme danger believe me. I am not suggesting we go to Iwa on a whim. The man I'm trying to extract knows most of the agents we have in earth country. If he is captured and interrogated our entire network there will be lost. It will take many years to rebuild and in the mean time we will be at a significant disadvantage when dealing with them. Whether this is an official mission or not Konoha's security is on the line here. I wouldn't suggest this if it weren't vital and wouldn't take Naruto with me if I weren't sure he was ready for it."

"Thanks Jiraiya-sensei." Naruto said happily.

"He is not going." Saishu said.

"Yes I am." Naruto moved to stand beside Jiraiya.

"Naruto! Do you understand how dangerous this is?" Saishu said.

Naruto nodded. "Sure it's about as dangerous as assassinating Orochimaru was, and I'm a lot stronger now than I was then."

"It's not like Naruto will be announcing himself. I plan to have him in disguise." Jiraiya stated.

"I'm going. If you want to protect me grand uncle you'll have to come to."

Saishu just shook his head and said nothing. If you had asked him the absolute last place on earth he would ever choose to be he would have answered in the middle of the rock village. But if Naruto was going he'd have to go to.

Yamato shook his head. "Jiraiya, you know I can't go without the Hokage's authorization."

"That's fine. Write to her. Since neither Naruto nor I will use a summons to help you it'll take at least a couple of days for you to contact her and hear back. By that time we'll be on a ship heading there. You won't be able to protect Naruto though."

Yamato frowned. There was no way he could keep them from leaving. "All right I guess I'll come with you. But you do know I'll be writing a full report on this?"

Jiraiya sighed. "Yeah." *I wonder how bad Tsunade is going to hurt me.*

---

Motsuwa entered the office and bowed to the Tsuchikage. "How may I be of service to you Tsuchikage-sama?"

The Tsuchikage looked at him stonily. "What is the status of your investigation?"

"I have narrowed the search to four members of the Council. I am currently going over financial records as well as records of their travel inside and outside of earth country. I am confident I will have the name of the traitor soon."

The supreme leader of the rock nins frowned at him. "You had best be absolutely certain of the name you provide me. If I put a Council member under arrest and he is **not** a spy every clan will be up in arms."

Motsuwa revealed no concern. "Tsuchikage-sama we have confirmed that the Leaf nins have received information that could **only** have come from the council. I have no doubts that one of them is indeed a traitor."

The Tsuchikage nodded. "It's good that you're so certain seeing as you are placing your own life on the line."

Still looking calm Motsuwa nodded. "Have I ever failed you Tsuchikage-sama?"

"No, that is why you are the head of the ANBU's investigation and interrogation section. That is also why I have trusted you with this. But I need a name and soon."

Motsuwa bowed and departed. "Hai, Tsuchikage-sama."

---

Five days later.

Iwa was considered the most impregnable of all the ninja villages. Not only did it have the highest and strongest walls, it was built on a plateau 3,000 feet high and surrounded on three sides by mountains. An enemy army could only approach by a single road and would be in clear view of the village for miles. Jiraiya and his group



approached the village hidden in the rocks openly and in broad daylight. He was dressed in his normal clothes and had his hitai-ite that read 'oil.' Yamato and Saishu were also dressed normally but did not have on their hitai-ites. This annoyed Saishu who wanted to make a point of wearing his Whirlpool hitai-ite in, 'enemy territory.' But Jiraiya had pointed out that it would draw too much attention.

Naruto was not wearing his normal black and red body suit as this would have matched Saishu's and again drawn attention. Instead he had on loose black pants and black shirt over his usual body armor. Over his mouth he had on a black ninja mask similar to Kakashi's and a black wrap covered his hair and forehead so that only his eyes and nose were visible. They could not use henges as too many experienced ninjas could spot them.

As a group the four of them approached the main gate going up the long winding road. "Now remember, we will be under surveillance the entire time and we should expect our rooms to be bugged. We need to be very careful and remember they'll likely arrest us if we give them any excuse."

"Or even if we don't." Saishu muttered.

As they approached the gate they saw the expected pair of Chunin along with another ninja.

Jiraiya recognized him. "Crap, it's Motosuwa."

"They're rolling out the red carpet." Yamato commented.

"Who is this guy?" Naruto asked.

"He's the head of Iwa's ANBU investigation and interrogation section. He's their top spy catcher, think of him as their Ibiki."

"Great." Naruto muttered.

Motosuwa was not much to look at. Unlike Ibiki he was not physically imposing. He was all of five feet and rail thin. He was bald save for a fringe of grey hair. He looked ordinary and unimpressive, except for his eyes. His hazel eyes were sharp and cunning and never missed anything. He didn't mind being dismissed as ordinary by those too foolish to look underneath the underneath. For his line of work being ignored was useful.

As they approached Jiraiya ignored the Chunin and approached Motosuwa. "Well this is an honor. How long has it been four, five years?" Jiraiya said in a chipper tone.

Motosuwa gave him a slight bow. His eyes went past him and roamed over the forms of his three companions. Naruto thought they lingered a bit on him before locking back onto Jiraiya. "Closer to six." Motosuwa replied in soft clipped tones. "To what do we owe the honor of a visit from the legendary Jiraiya?"

Jiraiya laughed. "I'm traveling the world doing a little research for my next book I just happened to be in the area so I thought I'd stop by and see if I could find some inspiration in the local beauties."

"Really?" Motosuwa tilted his head a bit. "That is interesting; according to reports I received you only arrived in earth country by ship three days ago. To have gotten all the way from the coast to Iwa that quickly you must have been moving at top speed. Almost as if you had a purpose here."

*He knows.* Jiraiya thought. He laughed some more. "What can I say? I couldn't wait to see if the women here are still as gorgeous as I remember!"

"Of course, would you introduce me to your companions?"

Jiraiya nodded. "This fine fellow is Yamato."

The ANBU captain bowed slightly. "It is an honor to meet you."

"Likewise." Motosuwa returned the bow.

"This is Saishu."

Saishu merely grunted. That was as much greeting as he was willing to offer a high ranking member of the Iwa ANBU.

A slight grin touched Motosuwa's lips. "You are an Uzumaki from what was whirlpool country. I recognize your uniform."

He stood just a little taller. "That's right; I am the last of the Uzumaki clan."

"Except for the prisoners." Motosuwa mentioned off handedly.

Despite themselves both Saishu and Naruto gasped. Motosuwa did not miss the reaction and sent Naruto a curious glance.

"What the hell do you mean prisoners?" Saishu demanded.

"Well we took several of them in the last war I believe a handful are still alive."

Saishu well knew that his clan had suffered terrible losses while leading the fight to preserve whirlpool against the hordes of invading rock nins. "That's a damn lie! You bastards never took prisoners! You always slaughtered all your captives!"

Motosuwa shrugged. "War is war and sometimes you can't afford to have prisoners." Naruto remembered the two Sound nins he'd captured and executed during the invasion. "But we always need healthy bodies to work in the granite quarries. We did take some prisoners and put them to work."

Saishu stared at him, horrified at the thought of family being slowly worked to death in the stone quarries for years. "If that's true why didn't you release them at the end of the war?"

"Because you didn't hold any of our prisoners to exchange them for so what would we have gained?"

Saishu didn't know if he believed him. Was it possible? "If this is true then I demand to see them."

"Hmmm, I'll consider it." Before Saishu could say more he moved on to the remaining ninja. "And who are you?"

"I'm called Nanashi." Naruto answered.

Motsuwa quirked a single eyebrow. "You're called, 'no name?'"

"That's right."

"Well that certainly isn't suspicious." Motsuwa looked at him closely. "Are you an Uzumaki? You reacted strongly to my information."

"No, I just care a lot about my friends."

"I see." Motsuwa kept his eyes on him. "You have the most extraordinary blue eyes."

Naruto chuckled. "Thanks, but I think you should know I don't bend that way."

"Hmmm, might I have a look at your face please?"

"I don't think you'll like it." Naruto warned.

"Nanashi," Jiraiya said in his cheerful tone. "Go ahead and show the man."

Naruto shrugged. "Fine." He pulled down his mask. His face was a ruin. His mouth, cheeks, and chin were a mass of burn scars. "I don't like showing off."

Motsuwa frowned. There was no henge being used. But there was something about this young man, this Nanashi that rubbed him raw.

What he wanted to do was immediately arrest him and haul him down to ANBU headquarters for a full interrogation. He sighed. Unfortunately there were rules to this game. He had to follow them or the other villages would stop following them as well. He stepped back and gave the man a slight bow. "I apologize for embarrassing you."

Nanashi put the mask back up. "No problem."

Motsuwa turned back to Jiraiya. "Knowing the lifestyle you prefer I took the liberty of arranging a couple suites for you and your friends. The Tsuchikage also requests the pleasure of your company for dinner tonight at the mansion. You will be expected at 6."

Jiraiya grinned. "I'll definitely be there; I never turn down a free meal or free booze."

Motsuwa nodded. "Well I'll leave you then. You and your companions are of course at liberty to do as you like in our village within the limits of the law." Motsuwa gave Jiraiya a meaningful glance. "I would *strongly* recommend you not break any of the laws here." He bowed and went on his way.

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As the four of them walked along a crowded street they whispered to each other.

"The suites will definitely be bugged and we will be under constant surveillance." Jiraiya stated.

"Yamato thanks for your help," Naruto said in a low voice. "How did you learn to use latex disguises?"

"One of the many skills of an ANBU." He replied just as quietly.

Jiraiya sent Saishu a worried look. "You all right?"

"I'm not sure." Saishu admitted. "Do you think that guy was telling the truth about prisoners or just trying to get a reaction out of me?"

"No way to really know." Jiraiya said. "But the war ended 15 years ago. It doesn't seem likely there would still be prisoners still alive."

Saishu sighed. "Probably not."

"If there are we're going to get them out." Naruto stated.

Jiraiya looked at him a little worriedly. "Listen *Nanashi* you know the reason we're here. We can't let anything distract from that."

Naruto shook his head. "If there really are Uzumaki clan members here then we are getting them out." He sent Jiraiya an uncompromising look. "No matter what."

# The good of Konoha

**Author's Note:** Thanks to everyone who has helped me to reach over **3,000** reviews. Along with that this story has also received over **half a million** hits. I truly appreciate all the positive feedback. Knowing that so many of you enjoy this story always motivates me to stay up just a little bit longer and write just a little bit more. And hey, who needs more than three hours of sleep anyway? Hope you enjoy the little section I have next as well as the regular chapter.

---

A 16 year old Hinata arrived at the Namikaze mansion in response to a summons from Kushina. She soon found the Namikaze matriarch hovering outside her son's door. From the other side of the door she could hear some sounds and her beloved's voice.

Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, "Two thousand nine hundred and ninety five." Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, "Two thousand nine hundred and ninety six."

Not sure what to make of this odd situation she turned to the older woman. "What is going on? Is something wrong with Naruto-kun?"

Kushina frowned a bit. "I'm honestly not sure. He came home yesterday mumbling something about a wish and he's been locked in his room ever since. He won't let me in and he refuses to come out even to eat. All I hear is that trapping and him reading off numbers."

"Two thousand nine hundred and ninety six."

"You see? I have no idea what's going on. So I was wondering if you would mind..." She nodded toward the door.

It took Hinata a moment to understand. When she did she sent Kushina a disapproving look. "You want me to spy on him?"

"Of course not."

"Good."

"Two thousand nine hundred and ninety seven."

"It's not spying if you're doing it for their own good. I want you to perform protective surveillance."

"Kushina it's not right."

"Two thousand nine hundred and ninety eight."

"Please Hinata, just to set my mind at ease?" Kushina implored.

Hinata sighed. She didn't really approve of this. Especially since the two of them were getting married in a few months. She wanted them to trust one another. "Very well, but only to set your mind at ease. **Byakugan.**"

"Well?"

Hinata shrugged. "He's just sitting at his computer typing. His health is fine."

"Two thousand nine hundred and ninety nine. Yes! Almost there."

Kushina and Hinata shared a confused glance. "Why don't you see if he'll talk to you?" Kushina suggested.

"All right." Hinata deactivated her blood line and knocked on his door. "Naruto-kun it's me Hinata. Can I come in?"

The door suddenly opened and there was Naruto with a wild look in his eyes and a huge smile. He had on nothing but a pair of boxers. "Hinata-chan perfect timing!" He reached out and grabbed his fiancé pulling her into his room and quickly shutting the door again. "I'm so glad you're here, you can see it happen!" He happily sat back down at his desk and began typing on his keyboard.



"Naruto-kun what is going on?" Hinata was feeling a bit worried at the situation.

He looked up from the screen and smiled at her. "All my wishes are about to come true."

"What?"

He nodded eagerly. "You see I had a dream where I asked the all powerful author to grant me my wishes. He told me that if I wrote him three thousand reviews and all of them different he would grant me all the desires hidden in my heart! And now I've written number three thousand and as soon as I press the, 'enter' button my wishes will all come true." As he stretched out his hand Hinata suddenly grabbed a hold of him.

"Naruto-kun wait a minute! Are you sure you want to do this?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Of course I am. Why wouldn't I?"

"Naruto-kun," Hinata said seriously. "Don't you know that in *every* story where someone gets a bunch of wishes something *always* goes wrong?"

"Oh come on Hinata-chan! What could be wrong in making the wishes in my heart come true? And besides this is the *author* we're talking about not some genie. I'm sure he would never do anything bad to me." He gave her a reassuring smile. "What could possibly go wrong?"

Hinata shook her head. "I have a bad feeling about this, but if you're sure then all right." She let go of his hand.

He smiled confidently. "I'm sure." His index finger pressed down and the 3,000th review was sent. He immediately began looking around expectantly, but nothing seemed to happen.

"Maybe it takes a while." Hinata offered.

There was a knock at the door. "Naruto, may I come in?" His mother called.

"Sure mom."

In Kushina strolled with a piping hot bowl. "Naruto dear I've suddenly decided that you're healthy enough that you can eat ramen whenever you like. So from now on I'm making my special ramen for you for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. I've also decided to stop spying on you and to never call you my little baby in public."

Naruto gave Hinata a triumphant grin before replying. "Thanks mom!"

Tsunade suddenly arrived. "Great news Naruto! The entire village has decided to hold a, 'we love Naruto' parade down main street. Everyone loves you now. The Uchiha clan has decided that since they're all such jerks that they will stop being ninjas and become civil servants instead. Except for Gabrella. Also the Council held an impromptu meeting and voted you my successor. Now I can finally retire." She put the Hokage hat on his head. "Congratulations Hokage-sama!"

"Thanks godmother!"

"Oh Naruto-kun I'm so proud of you!" Hinata said.

"So are we!" Suddenly in walked his father, Sarutobi, Shikaku, Inoichi, and Choza all walked in.

"Some how we've all been returned to life." Minato said. "And we all want to tell you how proud we all are of you son!"

"Thanks dad!"

"Minato!" Kushina cried out.

"Kushina!" Immediately they were all over each other.

"Hey!! Stop that!" Naruto cried out. When he'd thought of his father he'd never thought of him doing *that* with his mom.

Hinata turned from the amorous couple towards Naruto. "Naruto stop it!"

"Huh? What are you looking at me for? This isn't my idea!"

"Yes it is!" Hinata quickly explained. "You wanted *every* wish in your heart to come true. So on some level, probably subconsciously; you *wanted* your parents to be happy in a... uhm, affectionate manner."

Naruto shook his head violently. "No way did I... hey watch your hands dad!"

A dark haired boy no one had ever expected to see again entered the room. "Hn, so this is your room huh?"

Naruto stared at him. "Sasuke!! You're alive now too?"

"Yeah," looking bored he began to unbutton his shirt. "So do you want to do it or what?"

"WHAT?!" Naruto leapt out of his chair and backed away from the undressing boy. "Sasuke what the hell are you doing?"

Sasuke gave him a knowing smirk as he tossed his shirt to the ground. "Oh come on Naruto, we've always known that there was *something* there between us."

Hinata was staring at her soon to be ex-fiancé in horror. "Naruto!"

"Hinata-chan I am so not..."

"Excuse me," a cheerful Sakura skipped into the room and past a dumbfounded Hinata. She was wearing a cat suit that included two little ears atop her pink hair. Going over to Naruto she put her paws on him playfully and licked his face. "Purrrr." She hummed in his ear.

All of a sudden Temari bolted into the room and glomped on to him. "Temari... can't... breathe..."

"Got it!" Temari said, hugging him again, softer this time. "Better?" she asked, smiling.

Before he could reply Ino slunk into the room wearing a dark purple evening gown with a side slit all the way to her hip. Her perfect blonde hair was hanging halfway down her back. "Mmmm, you ready for me my big strong man?"

"Ino!" Hinata shouted. "You're supposed to be my best friend now!"

Ino looked at her unapologetically. "I'm sorry Hinata-chan, but somehow I can't resist." She continued towards Naruto swaying her hips.

Tayuya entered in a halter top and jean shorts. "Let's f#&k!"

"That's it!" Hinata shouted. She went over to Naruto and slammed her fist into his face. "PERVERT!!" She stormed out.

"Hinata-chan!" He called after her as she left. He sighed and rubbed his jaw. This was not what he'd had in mind. *Well at least it can't get any worse.*

"Yosh!" Lee was suddenly standing there wearing nothing but a green Speedo. "Naruto-san, please allow me to share with you my springtime of youth!"

Naruto groaned. *Then again...*

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The Tsuchikage palace was a magnificent building. Unlike most of Iwa it was not made of granite or concrete block. No, it was made from a special gold colored marble. In the evening sun it shined like it really was made of gold. There were four domes each four stories tall and a long line of massive columns on the perimeter of the

building. And of course it was huge, being more than a mile long with over a thousand rooms. It was exactly what you would expect of Iwa's Tsuchikage. The rock nins loved size. To them anything that was larger was always better. They had the highest walls, the widest streets, the tallest buildings, and the largest Kage mansion. That was the rock nins for you, always trying to impress and overawe.

Jiraiya smiled as he was escorted towards the dining hall. He knew a little bit about trying to impress people. But *he* did it with talent or his awesome wisdom. To his mind their architecture matched their politics; the rock nins never knew when to stop. Entering the expansive dining hall he was surprised to see only four people waiting for him. When he saw who they were he was barely able to keep his smile from slipping. *Damn it! I wasn't expecting this! I need to play things cool or everything will be ruined.*

Motosuwa saw the mask slip just for an instant. He was careful not to smile. He stood up and bowed as Jiraiya approached the head of the table where the others were seated. Two others stood and bowed as well. The man seated at the head of the table did not rise. That would not have been proper as a Kage outranked even a Sannin. The Tsuchikage was generous enough to grant a nod to his famous guest.

"Welcome Jiraiya," the Tsuchikage said pleasantly. "I trust your journey was not too arduous?"

"Not at all! I'm a veteran traveler and the roads in earth country are in excellent condition!" He gave his host a low bow and took the seat that was awaiting him. He would be sitting to the Tsuchikage's right, the place of honor. Next to him would be Motosuwa. Sitting across from them were two men Jiraiya recognized.

"Well I am pleased to hear that. I trust you already know Motosuwa of course. Allow me to introduce you to two of our Council members this is Dorobou and Nudoru." The Tsuchikage said in a friendly and open tone.

Jiraiya nodded. "Actually I think I've met both of you before, the last time I was here."

Dorobou nodded. "Yes you did. I certainly remember. It's not often you get to meet one of the Sannin."

Nudoru smiled. "It is indeed rare. I believe you're the only one of the Sannin to ever pay us a visit."

Jiraiya laughed and took a swig of his sake. He was surprised it was so strong. He set it back down. "Well if you'd had a casino here you would have seen Tsunade before she became Hokage. My other teammate likely wouldn't have announced himself. Seeing as he's dead now he won't ever get the chance to see this amazing village."

"You know it was shocking to hear the news that one of the Sannin had actually been killed. Tell me," Nudoru grinned. "Did you have anything to do with it?"

"I wish," Jiraiya replied. "But no, the glory of killing the late unlamented snake goes to Kakashi the copy nin."

Dorobou sent him a curious look. "You know we hear that the Kyuubi was there as well."

"Yes I've heard that rumor too. And by the way, his name is Namikaze Naruto, son of our beloved Yellow Flash of Konoha."

As he'd known it would mention of the Yondaime brought frowns to everyone but Motosuwa. Anything that set them back or was unexpected was good as far as Jiraiya was concerned. *This is worse than I thought. They must know that one of these two men is my contact. Obviously Motosuwa is here to see if I give anything away or if my contact reveals himself. I have to be very careful and play this cool while I look easy and relaxed. Such a shame I won't be able to fully enjoy this really good sake.*

The food was soon brought out and was excellent. Over delicious food and strong drink the conversation proceeded at a friendly pace and many different subjects were covered. Jiraiya was happy to entertain the others with many stories involving his exploits both in war and with the ladies. It was often difficult to distinguish which subject he was on at any given moment. Throughout the evening Motosuwa had little to say. Preferring to keep quiet and watch.

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"Well this has been a most entertaining evening." Jiraiya said sounding far more inebriated than he was. "But I think I should get back to my suite."

"I thank you for a memorable evening Lord Jiraiya." The Tsuchikage replied.

"Oh!" Jiraiya said as if suddenly remembering something. "Tell me is the kabuki performing tomorrow night?"

"Certainly, it performs most evenings." The Tsuchikage stated.

Jiraiya gave the two council members a warm smile. "Well won't you allow me to treat both of you gentlemen to an evening at the theater as a thank you for such an enjoyable evening?"

Both men readily agreed as it was an opportunity to be seen with the famed Jiraiya in public. Not long after Jiraiya and the two council members had departed. Almost as soon as they were gone the Tsuchikage had Motosuwa in his study.

"Well?" The Tsuchikage demanded.

"I am 70 percent sure that Nudoru is the traitor." Motosuwa replied calmly.

"70 percent?"

Motsuwa nodded. "Jiraiya actually gave away nothing. Despite his loud and attention drawing behavior he can be quite deceptive when he wishes to be. I noticed a few looks which seemed slightly concerned and at times he seemed over eager to speak to Jiraiya. Given this I judge the likelihood of his guilt to be 70 percent."

The Tsuchikage looked anything but happy. "A few concerned looks and he was eager to talk to one of the legendary ninja and *that* is your evidence?"

Motsuwa bowed. "My lord Tsuchikage, I eliminated all the other council members from suspicion. It is certainly one of these two. Given only a few more days I am sure I could find which is the traitor. However it seems certain that Jiraiya means to aid him in escaping sooner than that. Were you to simply allow me to arrest both..."

"No! The entire point of all this is to avoid angering the clans by arresting one of them without cause."

"But my lord, were you to allow it I would certainly catch the traitor."

The Tsuchikage frowned. "Yes and you would just as certainly arrest someone who is innocent." He shook his head. "No, until you are completely certain you may not arrest a council member."

"I see." Motsuwa answered calmly. "In that case we shall keep a discreet watch on both council members and have a heavy presence at the kabuki. Jiraiya will almost certainly attempt to pass information to one of them at that point."

The Tsuchikage nodded. "Do whatever you think best."

---

The following morning Saishu received a request for a meeting. He met with an ANBU in the hotel lobby. "Follow me." Were the curt words he was given and nothing more. Though he did not like it he still followed the masked ninja through the crowded streets of Iwa. After a time they came to a small unimposing one story building of



simple brick near the western edge of the city. Painted on the front of the building in fading white paint was the simple word, 'jail.'

Saishu's hands twitched and he wanted to take out his katana. If this were some sort of trap he would sooner die fighting than be a prisoner.

Motsuwa stepped out of the building and offered a very slight bow. "Good morning, I hope you slept well."

"Fine," Saishu admitted. "What is this about?"

Motsuwa gave him a slightly puzzled look. "I am sorry did you not say you were interested in the Uzumaki prisoners?"

He drew in a sudden breathe. He knew this was probably all a trick, but he couldn't help but feel a sudden hope. "You mean there really are prisoners from my clan?"

Motsuwa shook his head slightly. "We have **a** prisoner. We originally took six, but years in the granite quarry do little for one's health. Truthfully I am amazed that even one has survived this long."

Saishu glared at the man and had to keep from deliberately keep himself from pulling out his katana and attacking him. He had stood there and calmly related that five of his family member had been *worked to death* in the stone quarries.

"I can understand if you are upset." Motsuwa continued in his revoltingly calm manner. "But please keep your killer intent in check. I would hate for one of my ANBU to feel the need to strike you down in order to protect me."

Saishu brought his killer intent more or less backing control. "I want to see who it is. I want to see who is still alive."

Motsuwa nodded. "Of course that is why I brought you here. Come with me please." He walked back into the jail and Saishu followed

him without a second's hesitation.

It was a simple jail, most likely used to hold drunks and vagrants over night. There were only six cells. Five were empty. In the last one was a worn figure sitting on the stone floor in chains. He seemed weary and exhausted. His hair was long and dirty, it was mostly red with a good deal of grey in it. His clothes were mere rags of the cheapest grey sack cloth. But when he looked up his green eyes still held courage and the will to never give in even to the most hopeless situation. That strength was all that had allowed him to endure. Looking up he saw an old man in the clan battle dress. It took a moment but recognition came into his eyes. "Uncle?"

"Nephew." Saishu choked out and gripped the metal bars in front of him.

The prisoner smiled and actually chuckled. "I knew it had to be a lie. They told me Whirlpool was destroyed years ago. They said my clan was dead. But I always knew it was a lie."

Saishu ached for what he needed to say. It seemed so unfair to have to take away some of his nephew's hope, but the truth was better.

"They told the truth about whirlpool, it really is gone. But you still have family."

Sadness and disappointment flashed through his eyes. But there was hope as well and it was stronger. "Who? Who's left?"

Saishu looked back over his shoulder at Motosuwa. "I can't tell you that nephew, but you have family and you have a home that's waiting for you."

"A home? But if whirlpool is gone what home could I have?"

"Your home is wherever your family is and where you will be loved and accepted."

"Well, this has been touching, but we will have to go now." Motosuwa spoke.

Saishu turned hatefully towards the man. "I want him released! I can arrange to pay any ransom you name."

"We are not in the habit of ransoming our slaves." Motosuwa said calmly.

"I'll pay you a million ryu!!" Saishu shouted.

"No."

"Ten million then!"

Motosuwa tilted his head a bit and looked at him curiously. "Ten million ryu for a slave? Is he really that precious to you?"

"Yes damn it he is! He's my family."

"Could you actually come up with such a vast sum? You certainly don't appear wealthy. Would you try and get it from Jiraiya?"

"No, I happen to be very close to one of the wealthiest clan heads in the world, and she would gladly pay it. I could have the money here in a day."

"Hmmm, well that is tempting but no. I have a different ransom in mind."

"What do you want?" Saishu demanded.

"A name." Motosuwa answered. "I know why Jiraiya and the rest of you are here. Tell me the name of the man you are trying to rescue and you can have your nephew."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Saishu said blankly.

Motosuwa quirked an eyebrow. "Well that is a pity. In that case your nephew will remain here for the duration of your stay. Should you suddenly learn the name I seek by all means return here. Now it is time for you to go."

"Uncle," The prisoner got to his feet and tried to reach out but the chains kept him near the far wall and well short of the barred cell door. "I love you uncle, and please tell who ever is left that I love them as well."

"Damn it." Saishu reached through the bars but could not touch his nephew's out stretched hand. "I love you nephew and I swear to you that I will get you out of here."

---

Upon returning to the hotel he quickly got Jiraiya up and awake.

"Damn it what is so important?" Jiraiya was trying to rub his temples. "I mean I can't even sleep late here?"

Saishu shook his head not in the mood. "We need to talk."

---

The four of them went out into the village and found a small random café to have breakfast. With quiet whispers Saishu related what had happened.

"So I have another relative?" Naruto said excitedly but quietly.

"That's right," Saishu said. "And he has suffered endless heavy labor while watching the people around him slowly expire." He looked directly at Jiraiya. "We have to get him out."

Jiraiya shook his head. "I am all for helping you get your clan member, but not at the expense of harming Konoha."

"Whoever you're trying to save is a traitor and by definition scum." Saishu said flatly.

Jiraiya nodded. "That may well be true, but the fact is he has information that is useful to Konoha. Giving Motosuwa the name would destroy Konoha's spy network here and damage the leaf village."

Saishu leaned forward over the table. "The leaf village will survive no matter what happens here. But we are talking about the survival of my clan. And he is not only my kinsman but Kushina's and Na... Nanashi's as well."

"I know that." Jiraiya said firmly. "Under different circumstances I'd be the first to offer my help, but not at the cost of damaging Konoha. And since I'm the only one who knows the name I'm the one who gets final say."

"Oh really?" Saishu growled.

"Take it easy, grand uncle." Naruto said quietly. "Jiraiya is right. We can't jeopardize Konoha's security for personal reasons."

Saishu looked at him in surprise and disappointment.

Jiraiya nodded in approval. "I'm glad you understand Nanashi."

With both Jiraiya and Naruto against him Saishu settled down. He sat there quietly while the others ate breakfast.

After eating Jiraiya and Yamato left while Naruto offered to stay and talk to Saishu for awhile.

Saishu eyed his grand nephew with a great deal of sadness. "I'm sorry that this is not important enough to you to go against Jiraiya. But I am getting him out no matter what it takes."

Naruto smiled beneath his mask. "Grand uncle, I would never abandon anyone who is family."

"What? But you said you wouldn't jeopardize Konoha's security."

Naruto nodded. "I did and I won't. I won't hurt Konoha, and anyway there is no way Jiraiya would ever tell us the name so there was no point in trying to convince him."

Saishu looked at him and slowly grinned. "You're planning to do this behind his back aren't you?"

"This whole mission is being done behind the Hokage's back so I don't think he has any right to complain." He looked at his grand uncle with complete seriousness. "We'll get him out and bring him to Konoha. That's a promise." Saishu nodded in complete agreement. "Now tell me exactly where he's being held."

## Rescue in Iwa

It of course had to be a tragedy, Jiraiya thought. He was not a huge fan of kabuki to begin with. Any art form that refused to give women a place in it was seriously defective in his mind. Especially when so many of the performances were romances. The frightening thing was the actors playing women had such good costumes and such expert make up it was damn near impossible to tell. *Why do they go through so damn much trouble to have men look like women? Why not have women acting to begin with?* He'd actually gone to the trouble of asking a theater owner that once. The man had puffed up and shouted that it was tradition. This merely proved to Jiraiya that some traditions needed to be changed.

But in any case here he was sitting through some three hour production about the tragic love of the heirs of a pair of rival clans who *of course* hated each other. Five minutes in and Jiraiya had already known it would end with the two of them falling in love, being betrothed to others, running away together, and finally dying together when they found they could not escape. *Ordinary people never seem to get enough of the tragic. We ninja know better. There is more than enough tragedy in life; we don't need to see more of it.* Jiraiya would have preferred a comedy or even a happy romance rather than this. He sighed. Well it was all a part of the mission.

The theater had about two thousand seats and they were all packed. He was quite certain that a number of those seats were occupied by ANBU in disguise. He would not be surprised if Motosuwa was sitting somewhere out there as well watching him. He was seated in the middle of the third row with Dorobou and Nudoru sitting to either side. After almost three hours the climatic moment had nearly arrived. The young couple had been chased to the edge of a cliff with both their clans pleading with them to return. They each pleaded to be allowed to marry and be together, only to have each clan refuse in a single voice. So instead they held ion to each other and leapt over the cliff. The house lights suddenly dimmed to allow the

actors to 'disappear' over the cliff. In that instant Jiraiya leaned forward as though utterly enthralled by the performance. As he did so he 'accidentally' reached out and put his hand on top of that of each man to his side. When the lights came back up he withdrew his hands and sat back raving about the wonderful performance. One of his hands had held a tiny note. His agent had taken it and quickly hidden it on his person to be read later.

Jiraiya leaned back and relaxed. His work was finally done for the evening.

---

Together Naruto and Saishu walked out to the western edge of the village where Saishu pointed out the humble building. They hadn't bothered with any sort of disguises. They both knew they were being watched by the ANBU but it didn't matter. Now knowing exactly where his imprisoned relative was being kept Naruto and his grand uncle went off to find a restaurant and have dinner.

---

Back in his hotel room Jiraiya took out one of the **many** scrolls he always had with him. " **Release.** " On top of the scroll appeared a simple letter and a humble little stamp. The letter was written in the Tsuchikage's own hand and the stamp had been a painstakingly recreated copy of the Iwa seal of state. Jiraiya carefully studied the letter for a moment. He then took out a blank scroll and penned an order from the Tsuchikage in his own hand and with a signature. He then took the stamp and pressed it down on the paper beside the signature. *And just like that, an official order from the Tsuchikage. I really need to teach the kid all this stuff if he's going to replace me as spymaster one day.*

---

The next day the four of them went out and picked a random spot to have lunch.

"We're taking our guest out tonight." Jiraiya informed them in a whisper. "Take anything you really need but leave your back packs



and clothes behind. We have to look like we're coming back to our hotel suites."

"So what is the plan?" Yamato asked in a hushed voice.

"Listen carefully. I'm only going over this once." Jiraiya went over everything they would have to do to pull this off.

"It sounds awfully risky." Saishu stated.

"You can't win without taking a few risks." Jiraiya replied.

Naruto frowned. "You sound like godmother when she's gambling."

Jiraiya smiled. "Don't worry I actually have good luck. So long as nothing unexpected happens we should be fine."

Some how Naruto and Saishu managed *not* to look at each other.

---

"So who's up for a little late evening trip to the bathhouse?" Jiraiya said in a loud clear voice."

Everyone in the suite groaned. "What is it with you and bathhouses?" Saishu asked.

"It's my secret to staying young and virile. That and all the exercise I get chasing girls and avoiding angry mobs who find me doing research. Now let's go!"

Though he had to argue with them he eventually got them to all agree. The four of them went down the hall and entered an elevator that delivered them to the grounds floor. The four of them stepped out laughing and joking with each other, while four tiny mice also exited the elevator unnoticed.

---

Nudoru carefully stuffed the pockets of his vest with money and his wife's jewels. The damn harpy, she at least he wouldn't miss. His

heart was pounding. Tonight he would either leave his homeland forever or be arrested. It was hard for him to believe that all of this had begun over a little extra money. He had been young then and not allowed access to the family fortune. He'd run up some debts and the people he'd owed had threatened to go to his father in order to collect. His father would have been furious and he'd been terrified. That was when Jiraiya came along and offered to; 'help' by paying off all the debts. And all he'd asked for in return was a little information about some of the lesser clans. Only later had he realized what an idiot he'd been to fall for such a blatant trap. But by the time he'd figured it out it was too late.

It was too late for regrets now. He was a traitor and he couldn't very well just say, 'I'm sorry.' Sorry I sold out my clan, my village, and my Kage all just to protect my own ass. He imagined saying that to Motosuwa as he was being interrogated. He could easily imagine Motosuwa nodding and accepting his apology. Then tell one of his ANBU which bone to break next; always in that polite tone of course. He shuddered and got moving. The message from Jiraiya had said to meet him at the bathhouse at 11.

---

"Ahhhhh," Jiraiya said peacefully as he sank into the warm water.

The others were already enjoying the hot bath. "So how long do we stay here?" Nanashi asked.

"As long as we like." Jiraiya laughed. "Why? Do you have somewhere to be?"

---

Nudoru was about a third of the way there on an empty street when he was suddenly surrounded by Motosuwa and three masked ANBU.

"In the name of the Tsuchikage I place you under arrest." Motosuwa said calmly.

"No!" Nudoru shouted. Before he could even try to get away one of the ANBU struck him in the back of the head and knocked him out. The other two ANBU members took a hold of him before he could fall.

Motsuwa looked to the roof tops. "The two of you report in."

Almost instantly two more ANBU were standing before him. "Sir, has something happened?"

Motsuwa merely nodded. "I was given the name of this traitor and granted permission to arrest him. I want the two of you to go to his home and begin a thorough search. Tear it apart and find evidence to the degree of his treachery. I will be taking him to ANBU headquarters."

"Hai!" Both men bowed and disappeared.

Motsuwa turned to the others and the prisoner. "We have no time to waste let's go."

They began to move like a flash over the rooftops.

---

At the gate a pair of Chunin looked up as three ANBU rushed past with an unconscious prisoner. They were about to call out when Motsuwa stopped before them. "I am under orders from the Tsuchikage to transfer a prisoner." He held out an order obviously in the Tsuchikage and bearing both signature and official seal.

The two Chunins simply nodded, they both knew who he was and had no desire to impede him. Motsuwa quickly left to follow the others.

---

"Could you help me with something?" A small polite voice spoke.

Jiraiya opened his eyes. He was not surprised to see Motosuwa and eight fully dressed ANBU standing around the edge of the water. "You know you're going to need to take some clothes off to enjoy the water."

"I am not here for the water. I am here because I received a report that two of my agents had begun to search a home without my permission. When I spoke to them they claimed I had ordered them to conduct a search **after** I had arrested Nudoru."

Jiraiya looked surprised. "You arrested a member of the Council? Why?"

"I did not arrest him, though I had desired to. He was suspected of high treason."

"Really? He didn't seem the type."

Sighing Motosuwa took out a kunai and tossed it at Jiraiya's chest. As he had expected Jiraiya disappeared in a puff of smoke. He quickly took out three shuriken and did the same to the others who also disappeared. "Hmmm, well this is unfortunate." He turned to the ANBU standing to his right. "Jiraiya and his companions have no doubt already left Iwa. I want three Hunter squads sent after them immediately. Tell them their orders are strictly to eliminate Nudoru by any means. Since he is now under the protection of a Sannin that will prove extremely difficult, trying to recapture him would likely be impossible. Also send a squad to his home to arrest all members of his household and secure the location for a proper search." The ANBU nodded and disappeared. Motosuwa wore a small frown. "The Tsuchikage will not be pleased."

---

About fifteen miles outside of Iwa Jiraiya laughed. He was still in Motosuwa's image but the laugh was in his own voice. "It took them fifteen minutes to figure it out. That was actually better than I expected."

"I still can't believe that no one spotted our henges." Yamato said.

Jiraiya smiled confidently. (It looked somehow wrong on Motosuwa's face.) I never thought they would. No one thinks to check for henge when the situation is one that seems plausible. They only ever check when something is unusual."

Yamato considered that. "You know that's true, maybe we need to give out own security forces some training on that."

Jiraiya shrugged. "All right, they'll definitely send hunter nins after us but with a fifteen minute head start we should be able to escape them. We'll all take soldier pills and keep going non stop until we reach our destination."

"Where's that?" Naruto asked.

Jiraiya chuckled. "You don't need to know."

"Actually I do."

"Oh yeah?" Jiraiya turned back to look at Naruto. "And why's that kid?"

Naruto smiled. "Because I'm not the real Naruto, I'm just a clone. The real me is still in Iwa."

" **WHAT?!** " Jiraiya screamed. "Kid what the hell were you thinking?"

"I was thinking I wouldn't abandon someone who was family and that you wouldn't help me."

"Damn it Naruto this is no game! You know why I made the choice I did!"

Naruto nodded. "Yeah, you did what was best for Konoha and I understand that, which is why I helped. But I also have a duty to my clan and my family that is every bit as important to me as my duty to

Konoha. Godmother has a habit of saying that she's acting as the Hokage whenever she makes a decision she doesn't want to. I can understand that, and I know there are times when you can only choose one or the other. But in this case I've decided to do what's best for my village **and** my family."

"By making a suicide run?" Yamato said grimly.

Naruto grinned and shook his head a bit. "Oh have you no faith in you future Hokage?"

"Kid this is serious," Jiraiya said. "You are completely on your own in a village packed with enemy ninjas. What do you plan on doing exactly?"

"I plan to save my relative and then either sneak out or if I have to fight my way out. Then I'll meet you wherever it is you're heading."

Jiraiya looked at him. "Kid," he said quietly. "The odds of you making it out of Iwa are long."

Naruto gave him an easy smile. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine." He spoke with absolute conviction. "I will never die until I am Hokage."

Jiraiya stared at that smile. "We're going to a small fishing town in Waterfall near the border. It's called Atsugi, and we should be there in three days."

Naruto nodded. "A fishing town in waterfall called Atsugi; I'll meet you there in three days." He gave them all a simple wave and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Yamato turned angrily to Saishu. "You knew about this didn't you?"

Saishu nodded and answered calmly. "Yes I did."

"How could you have helped him do this? He's going to die there!"

Saishu gave the ANBU captain a hard look. "Naruto is the finest ninja I've ever known and I'm damn proud to call him my grand nephew. I would have stayed behind too but he insisted I go with both of you because he was sure he could not only rescue our kinsman but escape. And you know what? I believe him. I think he can do it. And if he can't?" Saishu was silent for a moment. "Then he will fall to try and save someone precious to him. It is his choice and no ninja could ask for a better end."

"It doesn't matter now." Jiraiya interrupted to prevent an argument. "It's done and we can't change it. Either he'll meet us in Atsugi or he won't. We can't do anything about him now; we need to worry about ourselves and Nudoru." That put an end to discussion and the three of them hurried on with their burden slung over Jiraiya's shoulder. Despite being so far away Jiraiya took a quick look back over his shoulder in the direction of Iwa.

*You better survive this kid, or Tsunade and Kushina are going to take turns murdering me.*

---

Naruto had used a henge of an Iwa ANBU as he approached the jail he dropped it. He had the same appearance as he'd had entering the village. He was surprised that there were no ninja on guard duty. There were just a couple of ordinary guards who couldn't mold chakra. He knew of course that it was a trap. But it didn't matter. He quickly and easily knocked out the two guards and dragged them inside the building.

The prisoner in the last cell immediately came to his feet as the strange ninja approached.

"Hey! You must be my uncle! Or I guess you could be my second cousin? I mean Saishu is my grand uncle and he says you're his nephew so that would mean you'd have to be either my uncle or second cousin right?" While talking Naruto had concentrated chakra into his right hand and quickly ripped the cell door off its hinges.

Approaching the prisoner he'd quickly snapped off his chains. "I'm really happy to meet you!"

The older man stared at him. He slowly nodded. "Well I'm very happy to meet you too. So I guess we're family?" Naruto nodded eagerly. "So you are an Uzumaki?"

Naruto shook his head. "No, technically I'm a Namikaze, but my mother is an Uzumaki so I am an Uzumaki by blood if not by name."

He nodded. "Who is your mother?"

Naruto was about to answer that when he felt chakra signatures from outside. "We have company." Naruto quickly knelt down in the cell and pulled out a scroll, ink well, and brush. He quickly began writing out the necessary words and symbols. Jiraiya had taught him what to do and he was very careful to get it *exactly* right.

"What are you doing?" The man asked.

"I can't protect you and fight a battle. So I'm going to seal you in a scroll and send you to my mom in Konoha."

"You're going to put me in a scroll?" He said a bit nervously.

Naruto nodded. "Yeah it's the only way. Don't worry I know what I'm doing."

"But..."

"It's the only way for me to rescue you." The scroll was complete.

The prisoner looked at this stranger who was claiming to be family. And for a reason he couldn't explain, found that he trusted him. "Well all right. I guess I'd rather be in a scroll than chained up."

"Don't worry, the next thing you know you'll be with my mom and you'll be safe." He performed a hand sign. " **Seal.** " The older man disappeared and the symbol for human appeared upon the scroll.



Wasting no time he bit down on his thumb and ran through a new series of hand signs. " **Summoning Technique.**"

Gamakichi appeared in a puff of smoke. He had the leather pouch on. "Hey boss," Gamakichi greeted. "Isn't this a little early for the mail run? And where are the others?"

Naruto rolled up the scroll and placed it in the pouch. "Never mind that, listen Gamakichi this is really important. I need you to bring this scroll to my mom and tell her one of our clansmen is sealed within and she should release him and take care of him."

"No kidding?"

"No, it's really important. Can I count on you?"

Gamakichi nodded. "You got it boss!"

"Thanks Gamakichi, I owe you big time."

"Will I still get two bags of chips for this?"

Naruto grinned. "For this I think my mom will cook you a seven course meal." With an excited nod. Gamakichi disappeared.

Naruto could feel more chakra signatures gathering all around him. That did not worry him in the least. Saishu had told him about the Uzumaki prisoners who'd been captured and worked in the granite pits until they died from exhaustion. He remembered all the stories his mom had told him about the Iwa nins and their cruelty. It was easy to feel anger at all the wrongs that had been inflicted on his clan. He was glad as more and more chakra signatures arrived. He'd been sort of hoping it would come down to a fight. He smiled and something dark and terrible awoke inside of him.

---

"What the hell?" An ANBU muttered.

"Can you feel that?" Another one said in a sickly whisper.

"What kind of chakra?" Yet another wondered aloud.

"Be quiet." Motosuwa said, admonishing his agents. "Do try and remember that we are ANBU and not a bunch of school children." He could understand why they were worried. He had never before felt such a powerful chakra, nor one with such an overwhelming evil taint to it. But that was no excuse to forget one's professionalism.

"You there in the prison." Motosuwa called out. "I know you are alone. If you surrender I will guarantee your life. You are completely surrounded by fifty ANBU ninja there is no hope of escape. Surrender peacefully and your life will be spared."

They could hear a deep laughter coming from inside the jail. Their enemy was still inside though and so they could not see him. "You need some more healthy bodies for the granite quarry? No thanks I'll pass."

Motosuwa signaled and four ANBU moved silently to the jail's door. "If you resist you will only make things harder for yourself. I have no wish to harm you. Tell me where Jiraiya and the others are taking Nudoru and you will not be harmed."

"Oh that's nice of you! You don't want to hurt me." The laughter came again and men began to feel something cold run down their spines. "Well the problem is I want to hurt you. I want a whole lot of payback for what you did to the Uzumaki clan."

"So you are an Uzumaki after all." Motosuwa spoke patiently as he signaled his men. As one four ANBU rushed in through the door.

Their screams were horrible, but did not last very long. Out the open their **pieces** were tossed out. Even hardened veterans of war and battle looked sick.

The most worrisome sign was that Motosuwa had dropped his mask and actually looked worried. Four of his ANBU had been slaughtered in just seconds. He looked to the man on his left. "Call in all additional ANBU reserves right now." The agent nodded and quickly disappeared. Motosuwa looked back at the building, the door had been ripped open but their enemy was still hidden inside. "It seems I've seriously underestimated you Nanashi. You *are* Nanashi aren't you?"

"You can call me that if you like, I have other names."

"Would you share them with me?" Motosuwa asked.

"All right, I have been called; monster, demon, son, friend, little brother, godson, nephew, kid, boyfriend, older brother, leader, grand nephew, and boss. I've been called all those things. I've also been called the Kyuubi, the demon of the Leaf, and the ever popular Yondaime's son." There were gasps all around. Motosuwa felt his heart turn to ice. "But my real name is Namikaze Naruto; though you can just call me death."

With an explosion the roof of the building was torn away and a figure leaped out and into the night air. They saw a figure covered in red chakra in an outline like an animal's. Three distinct tails could be seen. Out of the red chakra came a number of arms. The arms snapped out and caught the ANBU nearest to him. The men caught were quickly crushed overripe fruit. A storm of kunai, shuriken, and explosive notes came at him only to be shrugged off. He landed on the ground in front of the destroyed jail. An Iwa nin had transformed his body into living stone and rushed in without fear. Raising both arms the nin drove them down in full force atop Naruto's head. His fists were smashed and shattered as he struck the red chakra. Smiling Naruto had a chakra arm rise and smash down on the ANBU's head smashing him to rubble which quickly became meat. One ANBU opened his mouth and spat out a stream of fist sized stones as well as dirt and stone. Another clapped his hands; boulders appeared out of an empty sky and rained down on Naruto.

Another performed a jutsu and Naruto could feel himself being pulled into the earth.

Naruto laughed. They thought these were offensive jutsus? They had no idea. But he would show them. He began a complex series of hand signs.

---

As Motosuwa watched the battle unfold he thought back to the mistake he had made six years earlier. He had sent out a team of two elite ANBU operatives to Konoha to assassinate an academy student. The boy's name was Namikaze Naruto and he was the only son of the dreaded Yellow Flash of Konoha. The mission had ended in failure with two ANBU dead. An order had then come down from the Tsuchikage himself that there would be no more attempts. Motosuwa finally understood what a terrible mistake he had made. Not in trying to kill the boy, that had been a good decision as present events were bearing out. He should have sent two teams of ANBU.

Recognizing some of the complex signs Motosuwa worked a jutsu of his own. "**Earthworm Technique.**" His body quickly phased in the earth.

Just in time.

---

He slammed his hands together. "**Kamikaze no Jutsu.**" He unleashed the massive power of his chakra into the air all around him. He watched as the buildings in front of him were torn apart and torn down and as his enemies were sliced to pieces. In short order everything in front of him was laid to waste.

He could feel more chakra signatures heading his way. He was turning to face them when he felt his left arm feeling a little numb. *All ready? I've hardly started!* He wanted to tear them apart. He wanted revenge for what had been done to the Uzumaki clan. *If could force a fourth tail I could really wreck this place.* He shook his head. Where had thought come from? Using a fourth tail had made his

conscious mind submerge and given the Kyuubi at least some control. He would *never* let that happen again. He looked about at the destruction that he had caused. He had gotten some revenge for the Uzumaki. *I can't stay and fight to the end that really would be suicide. I need to go so I can catch up to everyone.* His red eyes glinted and his fanged teeth turned up in a smile. *But I'll leave something behind to cover my retreat.*

He worked some hand signs. " **Kage Bushin no Jutsu.** " Five hundred red chakra clones came into existence. He was glad that he only felt a little tired he'd be able to hold on to the red chakra cloak for a little while as he escaped. He'd have twenty clones with him to help him escape and carry him if he was too exhausted. He went over the wall with his escort while the rest pulled out their swords and went to meet the approaching ANBU.

---

"Shadow clones." An ANBU realized. He pulled out a pair of kunai and hit the two coming at him. The kunai hit their target. The clones left and still came on. As the ANBU realized there was something wrong one sword went into his belly while another sliced open his throat.

The Iwa ANBU quickly found themselves locked in a desperate fight with the red chakra clones.

---

Miles away as each clone was destroyed he received their memories. He smiled as he saw the rock nins paying a price for what they had done. And of course he had saved his clansman. Now all he had to do was meet up with the others. He let the red chakra go and exhaustion slammed into him. Two of his clones grabbed him without missing a beat and they kept moving at top speed away from the village hidden in the rocks. Just before sleep took him he wondered how his mom would react to what he'd sent her.

---

She was in her study catching up on some paper work when Gamakichi arrived unexpectedly. Like any ninja she saw a break in routine as signaling bad news.

"Gamakichi? What are you doing here? Has something happened?"

The frog nodded. "Yeah, Naruto sent me here with a scroll that he says you need to unlock. He says it has one of your family members in it and you need to take care of him. He also said you would cook me a seven course meal for this."

She immediately took the scroll out of the leather pouch. "He sent uncle Saishu back to me? Is he hurt?" Saishu was the only other family member she had so of course it had to be her uncle.

"Don't know."

She nodded and put the scroll on the floor in front of her. " **Release.**"

In a puff of smoke a man was standing there in front of her who was definitely not her uncle. The poor man looked shocked and bewildered. That he was in poor shape was obvious. She could see the outline of his ribs through the rags he was wearing. Whoever he was he'd clearly been poorly fed, she could also see scars on his arms and legs. What had happened to this poor man? And why had Naruto said he was family? She looked closely at his face and suddenly gasped.

It took him a moment to adjust to his new surroundings. There standing in front of him was a woman dressed in the red and black of the Uzumaki. She had ridiculously long red hair now, but her face was the same. He smiled at her. "Hey kooky, been awhile." He said softly trying to choke back sudden tears.

"URUSAI!!" She rushed forward and wrapped her arms around her brother.

## The Shodai's law

The Tsuchikage stood on a roof in the western end of his village and was overlooking the destruction. The sight reminded him of many from the third great ninja war. Several blocks had simply been flattened. The buildings that had stood there were reduced to rubble. And through the streets there were still bodies lying where they had fallen. The battle, for that was what it had been, had been over for about an hour. Many of the dead had been recovered and the wounded had either been treated on the spot or evacuated to the hospital. Near the center of the battle zone the bodies had been collected and put into neat rows and covered in white blankets. All the dead and wounded were his people. The enemy had done all of this and then simply escaped. He had seen such one sided defeats before. Back in the third great war when they had fought *him*. The Tsuchikage felt a familiar presence approach him.

"Report," the Tsuchikage ordered coldly.

Motsuwa replied calmly. "Estimates are about one hundred and fifty dead, with the number likely to rise. We have about twice that number wounded. Nearly all casualties were from the ranks of the ANBU."

"And the traitor?"

"It was Nudoru. Jiraiya and his other companions were able to affect his escape prior to the fight erupting."

The Tsuchikage turned and looked at him angrily. "Fight? This was no fight!" He waved at the scene below. "This was a full scale battle within our very walls! And you say the Yellow Flash's son did this?"

Motsuwa nodded. "That is what he claimed and given the chakra he possessed there seems no room for doubt."

He stared at the small man. "We had the son of the yellow Flash here within our very midst and did not even know it? I would call that a rather severe failure of our intelligence department. Wouldn't you agree?"

Motosuwa nodded and bowed. "I admit it was a failure and accept the responsibility."

The Tsuchikage tightened his fists angrily. "We had it in our power to end the Namikaze line once and for all with a cup of poison. Instead we have *this*. Tell me, *why* did the Namikaze attack us if the traitor had already been freed? Was this some type of distraction or was it a deliberate act of war?"

"Neither, I believe this was done to liberate a prisoner."

Tsuchikage looked at him in surprise. "What prisoner?"

"An old war prisoner who had been confined to the quarries, one Uzumaki Shinzou."

"An Uzumaki? Why in kami's name would the son of the Yondaime go through so much trouble for a dead clan from whirlpool?"

Motosuwa swallowed before answering. "It appears that his mother, Namikaze Kushina, may have been the prisoner's sister."

The Tsuchikage stared at him with cold unbelieving eyes. "His *mother* is an Uzumaki? And how did *that* little piece of information slip past you?"

Motosuwa replied in a small voice. "Her maiden name was not recorded in any public documents in Konoha. It is well known that she wears a whirlpool hitai-ite but her clan was not known to us. I only realized the connection due to certain statements made by the prisoner and a visitor he had from Jiraiya's party."



"If you had realized this a bit sooner it might have helped. For the first time you disappoint me."

Motosuwa could only nod. "I humbly apologize to you Tsuchikage-sama."

The Tsuchikage's hand turned to diamond. In a flash he struck and tore out his spy master's throat. Motosuwa grabbed the bloody gash and collapsed sputtering to the roof top.

"Apology accepted." With a kick he sent the still gasping body off the roof and down to the alley below. *It's a shame, but such a failure cannot be forgiven.* With a motion of his hand another man appeared to the Tsuchikage's right. He was in an ANBU mask and bowing. "You have just been promoted Takuya, congratulations."

"Thank you Tsuchikage-sama. I shall do my best to not disappoint you."

The Tsuchikage nodded. "That would be wise. Now, how many ANBU remain effective?"

"A little over two hundred." Takuya replied immediately. "Do you wish us to mount a pursuit after the Namikaze?"

The Tsuchikage looked at him with disappointment. "Of course not, after this display I would not pursue him with anything less than an army."

Takuya nodded and tried to hide his relief. "Is it your will to declare war on the Leaf village for this action? Certainly it is more than reason enough to begin a war."

"No!" The Tsuchikage shook his head violently. "I have no intention of starting a war against a village that has *him* on its side."

Takuya phrased his next question carefully. "Then you will ignore what happened here tonight?"

The Tsuchikage said sharply. "I never said that! There are ways to harm an opponent short of open war." He turned around. "Here are my orders. Announce that as of now we are breaking diplomatic relations with the leaf village and declaring an embargo. All fire country merchants in Iwa must depart within twenty four hours. None of our merchants are permitted to travel to Konoha or purchase their goods."

Takuya nodded gravely. "Hai Tsuchikage-sama." That certainly sounded serious, but in fact the two villages barely traded with one another. A boycott would do little to the economy of either village. Breaking off relations might make the Leaf nins a bit worried though. It did have an ominous ring to it.

"Also I want bounties placed. One million for Nudoru, five million for Jiraiya, and fifteen million for Namikaze Naruto."

"You mean to place a bounty on one of the Sannin?" Takuya said in surprise.

"That's right," the Tsuchikage replied. "Had he merely helped that traitor escape we'd have ignored it. But the Namikaze was clearly under his direction and so we will place a bounty on him. We will also issue kill on sight orders for him and Nudoru should they ever be spotted in earth country again."

"And what of the Namikaze?"

The Tsuchikage let out a resigned sigh. "Issue a retreat on sight order. Also change his ranking in the bingo book from A to S rank."

"Hai Tsuchikage-sama." Neither of them mentioned the importance of that decree. In the whole history of Iwa only one enemy had ever been given a retreat on sight order. That Namikaze Naruto had earned one would send a clear message to every Iwa nin that he was as dangerous as his father had been.

"There is one more thing concerning the Namikaze."

"Yes Tsuchikage-sama?"

"Let us see if we can find some allies to help us deal with him." The Tsuchikage smiled. He intended to put an end to the Namikaze line one way or another.

---

Three days later.

The four of them were waiting by a small café on the outskirts of Atsugi. There was only one road into the village and they had a perfect view of it. The four of them had all hinged to look like local fisher man.

"We should get out of here." Nudoru whined.

"Shut up!" All three answered

"I'm sure we've shaken pursuit and I've hired a boat with enough cash to guarantee we leave whenever we want and go anywhere no questions asked." Jiraiya added in an annoyed voice. "Now relax, I've told you we'll go just as soon as the kid shows up."

"Who are you kidding? There's no way he could have made it out of the village!" Nudoru insisted.

"Shut your mouth or I'll shut it for you!" Saishu snapped. "Naruto definitely got out and he will definitely get here."

"Don't try and get angry at me just because you sacrificed one of your own. Losses are inevitable and on high risk missions they have to be expected. You..." Nudoru trailed off as he felt killer intent from all three of them. Especially from Saishu who was gripping his sword.

"I'm not in the mood to listen to any more complaints from you." Jiraiya stated harshly. "I need to get you back to Konoha alive. Gagged or unconscious will do fine."

Nudoru wasn't ready to give up yet. "Wasn't the whole reason you came to Iwa to get me safely out? Well I won't be safe until I'm in Konoha. So why are we delaying? We should accomplish the mission not sit here waiting for someone who isn't coming."

"You don't know Naruto." Jiraiya said. Yamato and Saishu nodded.

"Maybe not but I know my people. That jail was obviously a trap and there's no way they'd have let someone get away."

Jiraiya looked over at him. "Oh yeah? Well I happen to know that there's no way that all the rock nins could ever stop Naruto. That kid is way too stubborn to let anything stop him until he's the Hokage."

"Just how long do you plan to wait?" Nudoru asked.

Jiraiya looked away from him and back towards the road. "We'll wait here until sunset. If he hasn't arrived by then I'll put you in Yamato's care and he'll get you to the rendezvous point where you'll meet your ANBU escort."

"What about you?"

"Saishu and I will stay here and start looking for him."

Nudoru shook his head. "You're an idiot."

Jiraiya shrugged. "You sure wouldn't be the first one to ever think so. But there's no chance in hell I'll give up on the kid."

With that Nudoru simply sat back to wait for sunset.

---

About an hour and a half later they saw a single figure running up the road. It was obvious from his speed that he had to be ninja. Jiraiya, Saishu, and Yamato immediately got to their feet.

"It's Naruto!" Saishu said happily.

"It might be a hunter nin." Nudoru said and was ignored.

He quickly came close enough for them to see a young teen with dark hair and a black outfit. He spotted them and quickly came over to them. He dropped from a dead run and came to a halt. He'd been running non stop from Iwa just as they had. They could smell the sweat and body odor. He doubled over and put his hands on his knees. "Hey, did I keep you waiting long?" The voice was Naruto's

All three men swiftly embraced him and asked him if he was all right between congratulations and welcomes.

Naruto had one of his huge smiles as he looked to Saishu. "I got him out. I put him in a scroll and sent him to my mom!"

Saishu nodded and placed a firm hand on his shoulder. "I knew you'd do it! I am so proud of you Naruto and I know your mom will be just as proud. I'm sure she's very happy to be with her brother again."

"He's my mom's brother?" Saishu nodded. "So that means he's my uncle!"

"He certainly is." Saishu said proudly.

"Are you all right Naruto?" Jiraiya asked.

"Yeah I'm fine. I am sort of hungry and tired though."

Jiraiya nodded. They had been going all out since leaving Iwa. They had all sustained themselves on soldier pills and some water. Jiraiya's group had gotten the chance to eat and rest a bit. They knew just how tired and hungry Naruto had to be.

"That's not a problem kid. You can eat before we get on the boat and as soon as we're at sea you can sleep all you want. So you're definitely o.k. right? No wounds or anything?"

Naruto smiled. "I'm fine."

"Good." Jiraiya immediately hit him on the top of his head... hard.

"Ow! What was that for?" Naruto began to rub the top of his head. Both he and Saishu sent the man a surly look.

"That was for pulling such an idiotic boneheaded stunt you world class baka!" Jiraiya shouted at him. "Don't you ever pull something like that behind my back again!"

"Oh that's a good one!" Naruto shouted right back. "This from the man who deliberately went behind the **Hokage's back** !"

"Hey! I had my reasons!" Jiraiya growled.

"So did I!" Naruto growled right back.

"You did Naruto." Saishu stood beside him and helped him glare at Jiraiya. "I am damn proud to call you my grand nephew and I have never known a better ninja or person."

Naruto sent him a wide smile. "Thanks grand uncle!"

"Don't encourage him to be take stupid risks!" Jiraiya stated.

"Look who's talking!" Saishu shot back.

"I hate to interrupt." Yamato spoke up. "But how about we get Naruto some food and then get on the boat?"

Jiraiya grunted. "Fine but we'll be talking about this more later."

"Fine," feeling starved Naruto headed towards the café and his first meal in three days.

Yamato looked to Jiraiya. "Now that he's back I'll be sending the Hokage a full report on the mission."

Jiraiya sighed. "I know. I just hope she decides to let me live."

A few hours later they were out on the ocean well out of sight of land. Naruto was curled up in a tiny bunk below the deck. Jiraiya sat down in a rickety chair by the edge of the bunk. He calmly felt the ship rock back and forth. They had dispelled their henges as soon as they were out to sea. Jiraiya reached out and affectionately rubbed the top of Naruto's blonde hair.

"You know kid," he whispered. "I'll probably never tell you this while you're awake. But I'm very proud of what you did. Risking your life without a second thought for someone you haven't even met. That's something your father would have done. Kid, in all the ways that really matter you are already every bit as great as Minato was. And I know that when you're the Hokage you will be the greatest of them." He chuckled softly. "But you had better be sure to give me some of the credit."

Naruto opened a single eye and grinned. "It's a deal pervy granddad."

Jiraiya stared at him for a moment. He then began to wiggle his fingers about his face. "It's a dream it's all a dream, oooohh."

Laughing a bit he closed his eye. "Nice try, but I heard you say it and you don't get to take it back."

---

One week later.

Tsunade grinned as Kushina and her brother entered her office. She thought he looked much better than he had; he'd certainly gained some weight. Kushina had called her immediately to check his health. It was stunning to actually get to meet her brother Urusai after she'd heard so many stories about him. She'd found him in good health save for his malnutrition. She'd given Kushina a list of foods to help him return to health and had then listened to his story of being rescued by Saishu and a mystery ninja who claimed to be family. It was obvious who the mystery ninja was. As they had talked they had made some plans for the immediate future.

Kushina and her brother both bowed to her. "Hokage-sama thank you so much for granting the request of my brother Uzumaki Shinzou to reestablish the Uzumaki clan here in Konoha."

Tsunade smiled. "Shinzou? I thought his name was Urusai?" She couldn't resist teasing her friend just a little.

Kushina looked embarrassed while her brother looked mildly amused. "So you referred to me by my nickname huh?" He asked her in slightly mocking tones.

"Hey everyone called you that even uncle Saishu. The only people who never used it were mom and dad." Kushina said defensively.

He grinned. "That's all right kooky, I forgive you." He had a too innocent expression on his face.

"Kooky?" Tsunade smiled.

Kushina looked at her older brother with real annoyance. "You know I hate that name."

Her chuckled. "Fine, you stop calling me; 'shut up' and I'll stop calling you kooky."

"Fine." She agreed.

"Well then," Tsunade spoke in an amused tone. "Why don't we get back to the matter at hand? Namely the reestablishing of the Uzumaki clan. Now as you know my grandfather the Shodai established the laws pertaining to adding clans to this village. Any new clan must meet one of two conditions. They must either possess a unique kekkei genkai or else they must practice a special fighting style. It was always said that the Uzumaki clan's skill with the blade was unmatched, which qualifies under the second condition. Therefore I am happy to grant your petition and extend to you Uzumaki Shinzou and to your uncle Uzumaki Saishu the legal status of clan." Tsunade chuckled at what she would cover next.



"Now the matter of finances and the acquiring of a clan estate I will leave for later. What I wish to discuss currently is another law my grandfather established that is relevant to your circumstance; the law of clan restoration. Now normally in Konoha we recognize monogamous marriages, a man can only have one wife at any time. Once married he cannot take another wife save the first wife dies or is divorced. However in special cases where a clan is in danger of becoming extinct certain... allowances are made to protect the clan's future and ensure its special ability is not lost. As you and your uncle are the only recognized members of your clan, you will be permitted, under the law of clan restoration to take up to three wives to help you restore the numbers of your clan."

Shinzou slowly smiled. "Three?"

Kushina frowned at him. "This is so you can have *children* not just so you can have fun."

"Can't I have both?" Shinzou said innocently. Kushina had to fight to keep from hitting him. In all the years she had suppressed just how annoying he could be.

"Just make sure to have children," Kushina said. "That's your responsibility now."

---

Watching the two of them go Tsunade let herself have a small laugh. Shinzou's miraculous return was the one good thing that had come from Jiraiya's action. From a drawer she pulled out two reports, one from Yamato and one from her idiot teammate. It was quite clear that Jiraiya had deliberately acted without contacting her knowing she would never have agreed to him taking Naruto and the others to Iwa. Had she been told of the situation she might have sent in a mission, or she might not, but Naruto would never have gone in. Naruto's own words in the reports made it clear he had fought, and killed, a number of Iwa ANBU following the rescue of his uncle. When he eventually returned she would yell at him about not considering the possible consequences of his actions. But in her heart she could not

really fault him for taking the risk to save a family member. Under similar circumstances she would have done the same for Nawaki. No, she blamed Jiraiya. He had been the one in charge and it had been his decision that had put Naruto in the position to begin with.

She looked at a couple other reports. Now because of that decision she was dealing with a great many problems. The reports of the new bounties worried her. Nudoru had been delivered to the village and would have to remain under constant ANBU protection to safe guard his life. Jiraiya and Naruto had been given *additional* reasons to watch their backs. The embargo and the breaking off of diplomatic relations didn't worry her. What scared her was that Iwa *could* have declared war over this. She suspected one reason they had chosen not to was Naruto himself. If the reports she had were true he had killed well over a hundred of Iwa's ANBU. Could Kakashi have done that? Or Guy? Or Asuma? She shook her head. *Not a chance in hell.* Could she have defeated a hundred ANBU? She thought about it and answered honestly. *No, maybe I could beat half that many. But not a hundred.* Did that mean Naruto was already the most powerful leaf ninja? Even if he really wasn't he was now clearly at the very top. And he would get stronger with more time. *If he lives.* It was a chilling thought and she shoved it away as fast as she could. But the fact was that along with gaining power he was also gaining the wrong sort of notoriety.

He was now an S-rank opponent according to the Rock nins. Naruto was making some very dangerous enemies. And in the meantime the threat of Akatsuki always remained in the background. He didn't need such stunts to remind them of his existence. It was also clear that the rock nins would be taking a much greater interest in him now. The list of people who were a threat to Naruto was growing thanks to what had happened.

For that she was going to punish Jiraiya when he eventually returned. But she had not yet decided on what punishment it should be. She was stuck between breaking all his bones or skinning him and then dipping him in a barrel of salt. Decisions, decisions...

## A long awaited return

Three members of team Kushina gathered at the Namikaze mansion. Tonight her carefully laid plans would all come together. Kushina smiled at the two of her students who were in front of her. Haku had grown a few inches and become a bit more rugged. He was still kind and polite but his relationship with Gabrella and close *friendship* with Tayuya had given him a better grasp of dealing with women and of relationships in general. Since becoming Chunin his kekkei genkai had grown stronger and even more impressive. Many people, including Tsunade and the Council, had noticed and were encouraging him to petition to form a clan. He was well past seventeen and so old enough for marriage and beginning a family. But the requirements of forming a clan were proving... complicated.

Kushina glanced at the powerful and confident kunoichi who was holding hands with her boyfriend. Gabrella was also seventeen and was a fierce beauty with her dark eyes and long black hair. It was hard for Kushina to believe that the Jonin standing before her had ever been a hair's breath from losing her ninja status. It was incredible to think that anyone had thought the girl a failure. Kushina had personally given the girl a katana for her sixteenth birthday and told her she was a first level blade master. With her sharingan, her fire jutsus and her ability with a sword Gabrella was considered one of the top kunoichi's in the village and one of the Uchiha clan's elite.

Kushina frowned. The Uchiha clan. The clan and more specifically her father were making things difficult. The Uchiha clan's standing in the village had improved a bit; they were no longer hissed at or called murderers. But they were no longer generally admired either. Even with all the tragedies that had dogged them in recent years the clan held fast to its secretive ways. They also held firm to traditions that were causing Gabrella to face some hard choices.

Kushina smiled and let the thought go. There really wasn't anything she could do about it. "Haku, go ahead and bring Tayuya in."

Haku nodded. "Yes Kushina-sama." He turned to go but was stopped when Gabrella refused to let go of his hand.

"Sensei," Gabrella said with a warm smile. "Why don't I go get her instead?"

Kushina shook her head. "Gabrella you *know* that it will be a lot easier if Haku does this."

Haku smiled and leaned in to give her a quick kiss. "It's all right; I'll be right back with Tayuya."

"Great," she let go of him and watched him quickly disappear.

Kushina could see the way Gabrella's eyes followed him as he left. "You know, there's no reason for you to worry. Haku only cares about her as a..."

"Friend," Gabrella finished for her. "I know that."

Kushina sighed. This was another problem she really couldn't do anything about. In two and a half years they had become an effective squad. Their abilities blended well together. So well that they still often worked as a unit despite the promotions. Yet despite their many missions and time spent together there were strong feelings that remained just beneath the surface. "Come on lets make sure everything is ready."

Gabrella nodded. "Hai sensei."

---

There was a knock on her apartment door and she froze for just a second. *Why is he here?* Before doing anything else she took a quick look in the mirror. She looked much more feminine than she used to, even if she didn't wear make up. Her red hair was neatly combed and had been put into a single long braid. She wore a beige skirt that stopped about half way above her knees and a tan shirt. She no longer wore a cap and her leaf hitai-ite was tied around her

forehead. The girl staring back at her from the mirror was a strong Chunin of the leaf. A beautiful and untamed 17 year old girl who did not take s#&t from anyone.

*Would he like me better if I wore lipstick?* She frowned at the girl in the mirror. No, no, no; she wasn't a girly girl who always needed to have make up on. *She* was no high and mighty Uchiha princess. She didn't waste her time worrying about her looks.

She quickly put a couple stray strands back into place before going to answer her door. She already knew who it was of course. Whenever he was near she just knew it somehow. And even though she saw him all the time she could still feel her heart beat just a little bit faster. She opened her door with a smile.

"Hi Haku."

---

"So what is this emergency meeting about?" Tayuya asked. The two of them had just arrived at the front door to the Namikaze mansion.

"I can only tell you that it is a matter of great importance to Kushina and myself." Haku answered truthfully.

Tayuya shrugged and they went in through the door.

" **Surprise!**" A loud shout from many voices greeted them and Tayuya jumped back just a bit. There in the parlor was a small crowd of people and a large banner that read, 'Happy 17th Birthday Tayuya!'

"Happy birthday Tayuya." Haku said to her.

"Uhm, thanks, I guess."

Kushina came up to her with a great smile. "Happy birthday!"

Tayuya tried to hide her discomfort as best she could. "Thank you sensei, but didn't I tell you I never celebrated my birthdays? Not even when I was little and still with my mom."

Kushina nodded. "You did, which is why I decided to go ahead and throw you a party. I think it's high time for you to see what it feels like. Who knows? You may just like it."

*I highly f#&king doubt that.* "Well arigato sensei I appreciate you going to all the trouble for me."

---

People came up to her and wished her a happy birthday. She smiled and endured it as best she could. Even after all this time in the leaf village and getting to know so many different people she was really only close to three; Haku, Kushina, and Alysa. There was music playing and the dining room was filled with food and drink. The birthday cake had not been put out yet. Tayuya decided to try and hang back and watch the festivities.

---

A little eleven year old girl in a pink dress and her hair done in two braids with pink ribbons ran up to her. "Happy birthday Tayuya-chan!"

"Thanks Alysa-chan." Tayuya really liked the little girl. Even if she did care too much for pink. She bent down and gave the little girl a hug. "How are you doing sweet heart?"

Alysa had a huge smile and was bouncing up and down. "Great! I love birthday parties!"

*Well that at least makes one of us.*

---

Hinata sought out Kushina after delivering her birthday wishes to Tayuya. She wasn't close to the girl but had still come as a friendly gesture. Looking on the crowded dance floor the fifteen year old

beauty sighed a bit. There were many couples dancing together. Her best friend Ino was dancing with her boyfriend of over a year, Akimichi Chouji. Ino had once insisted she could never date a quiet, shy, heavy boy like Chouji. Even if it was obvious that he cared for her and would be good to her. Ino would always say she wanted someone like Naruto, someone amazing and cool. Hinata had slowly brought Ino around to the fact that it was never, 'coolness' that made Naruto special. It was his warmth and his love for the people in his life. She had helped convince Ino to give Chouji a real chance, and a year later they were still happily together.

Hinata watched as Ino sent a hard look to another couple on the dance floor. Hinata shook her head. Ino still had very hard feelings about the hostages from Suna. About one hostage in particular. There across the floor Temari danced close to Shikamaru. When she had first arrived her hair had been cut short as a sign of mourning. She now wore it in her own unique style with four ponytails. Her relationship with Shikamaru was both sweet and frightening at the same time. She would regularly yell at him and hit over the head. She would also walk hand in hand with him and be by his side standing protectively. In a funny way the two of them sometimes acted like an old married couple. They would regularly complain about each other's faults and argue constantly, but they were always together and always seemed to be happy.

There was Haku dancing with his girlfriend. They really did seem perfect for each other. In the time they had been together they had managed to rub off on one another. He had made her a bit calmer and quieter. She had made him just a bit more outgoing and assertive. She really hoped the two of them would find a way to deal with the problem they were facing.

The sight of so many happy couples gave her a small twinge of jealousy. Without conscious thought she rubbed the diamond ring she now wore on her left hand. She wanted to be one of those happy couples dancing to the music. She wanted the feel of Naruto's arms

around her again. Though she was a little sad there was one consolation.

"Kushina," Hinata asked eagerly. "Has Gamakichi come yet?"

Kushina shook her head. "I'm afraid not. He normally always comes in the morning but he seems to be running late today." She smiled at her future daughter reassuringly. "Don't look so nervous Hinata-chan. He and the others will definitely be returning in a week."

Hinata nodded eagerly. "Oh I know, I can't wait!"

Kushina nodded. "I know dear I miss him terribly too. But we just have to be patient for a little while longer."

"What do you think the surprise he mentioned in the last letter is?"

"Well knowing my son he has probably learned a new jutsu. When he finally comes home we can go over all the wedding arrangements and make sure he's happy with them."

"Do you think he won't be?" Hinata asked a bit nervously.

"Oh no, I'm sure he'll be relieved that everything is set and that he won't have to worry about it."

Hinata frowned just a bit. "I wish it wasn't so far away, a whole year. Why do we have to wait all the way until next April to finally marry?"

"Now dear you know why. Sixteen is the minimum age for marriage and you won't be sixteen until December. The roses don't bloom until this time of year so next April would be the earliest you could hold a wedding outside in the rose garden."

"Maybe we should get married inside, then we wouldn't have to wait."

Kushina looked at her in surprise. "Why the sudden rush Hinata-chan? You have waited this long what are a few more months?"



"I guess it's not a big deal. I just want to be with him always."

Kushina placed a gentle hand on Hinata's shoulder. "Now Hinata-chan the important thing is that the two of you love each other and will be a good match." Kushina looked to a spot on the dance floor. "Unlike some." She muttered.

On the dance floor a certain purple haired, 27 year old, special Jonin was dancing with a partner who was ten years her senior. She had on her usual tan colored trench coat with only a mini skirt and fishnet on underneath. Her dancing style consisted mostly gyrating wildly and rubbing herself against her dance partner. Her enthusiasm and her style of dancing guaranteed that she and her partner had a wide area all to themselves. Everyone looked at the two of them with a mix of shock and embarrassment and (most of the boys) envy. But Anko just kept going while Shinzou was on the receiving end and had a smile so big it threatened to split his face.

Kushina let out a sigh, even after six months she found it hard to believe that she and Uzumaki Anko were sisters in law.

---

Six months ago.

"Please tell me this is a joke." Kushina implored.

Shinzou grinned. "Nope, I asked her this morning and she said yes."

"But you barely know her!" Kushina growled. "How can you marry someone you've only been dating for a week?"

"I know I have more *fun* being with her than any one I've ever known. She makes me smile every second I'm with her. She likes being with me too. So what's the problem?"

"The problem is that your *job* now is to have children and repopulate the Uzumaki clan, not live out a bunch of teenage fantasies." Kushina was on low simmer trying not to blow up at him. He was her

older brother and she loved him, honestly she did, but he could be such a child at times. "Don't think for one second I'll let you out of our deal."

Shinzou let out a weary sigh. "Look sis, I haven't forgotten. You promised to give me a third of your fortune to help me establish the Uzumaki clan here as soon as I'd fathered three legitimate heirs. I want to restore our clan just as much as you or uncle does. I think the fact that I've married Misaki and Aoi *and* gotten them both pregnant should prove that."

Kushina couldn't really argue that. His first two wives were very nice very quiet and very plain women in their late twenties. Both women came from honorable but poor backgrounds. Both also had the ability to mold chakra but failed to become ninjas. But because they could both mold chakra the odds were practically 100 percent that the children they had with her brother would be able to as well. Being poor and not really attractive neither woman had found a husband. They'd been stunned and honored to have the chance to marry into a ninja clan, even with the special circumstances. Her brother was kind to both of them, but felt no love. The marriages had the feeling of being business deals, and in a way they were. The two women were marrying into a wealthy new clan where their needs and the needs of their children would always be taken care of. Shinzou got a pair of faithful and committed wives who would give him children. Everyone got something, but love was no part of the bargain.

"So are you trying to say you love Anko?"

Shinzou laughed. "Every single chance I get." Kushina immediately punched him in the arm. "Ow!"

"I'm your sister! Don't say such disgusting things to me."

Shinzou rubbed his arm. "What's wrong with you? I used to joke like that all the time around you."

"I'm an adult now. I'm not an immature teen anymore."

Shinzou looked at the bruise that was just starting to form on his arm. "You sure about that?"

She sent him an annoyed look but also reached out to touch his arm. "Hold on a second." She sent a tiny sliver of chakra out through her finger tips and healed the minor injury. "Better?"

He nodded. "Much, thanks sis."

She let out a sigh. "You know I'm only saying all this because I love you right? Anko is just not the sort of woman you should marry. I don't want you to get hurt."

Shinzou smiled. "Kushina I spent 15 years of my life in Iwa cutting and hauling stone. I think I would *enjoy* having a woman like that hurt me. Look, I know she's not typical wife material, but hell that's what I like about her! She makes life exciting and fun. I need some of that or life here would be as dull and grey as it was for me as a prisoner."

Kushina looked at her older brother. "Does she understand you're just looking to have fun with her?"

He laughed. "Are you kidding? Do you think she'd agree to this if I weren't?"

Kushina shook her head. *Her* marriage and hopefully her son's hadn't been about just having fun. But she was willing to make one very large exception given what his life had been before. "Fine," she muttered. "But she has to sign the prenuptial like Misaki and Aoi did."

"All ready done, so you'll come to the wedding right?"

"Sure, but just so you know I give it a month."

Shinzou winked. "So do I."

---

"Don't worry about it too much Hinata-chan. The important thing is that when you and Naruto marry it will be for love. That's what matters." Kushina stated.

---

Tayuya leaned against the wall and watched as Haku and Gabrella slow danced. On the outside she was calm and relaxed; inside she ached with that old familiar hurt. Why were some people just handed everything? Gabrella had a huge family that adored her, she was the heir to her clan, she had a powerful kekkei genkai, had made Jonin, was rich, beautiful, smart, and if all that wasn't enough she had Haku. The bitch was a f#&kin' princess. So why did she also have to get the one guy that Tayuya felt something for? It wasn't fair.

Out of nowhere a big smiling face popped up in front of her. "Hey baby, did you miss me?"

Tayuya gave the annoying boy a flat look "No, and you smell like wet dog."

Kiba laughed and leaned in just a little closer. "Me and Kakashi just got back from A-rank all the way out in Waterfall. Sensei wanted to take it easy and get here tomorrow morning, but there was no way I was missing your party. I even got you a special present." His smile suddenly became a leer.

"If you got me panties I swear I will shove them down your throat." She saw his smile slip. *F#&king figures.*

"Why do you have to be so mean to me?" Kiba complained. "I'm just trying to be nice to you."

She sneered. "Yeah right, I know what you're trying to do. And by the way," she reached out and grabbed his chin jerking it up a bit so they were on the same eye level. "I'm up here."

Kiba grinned; feeling a bit embarrassed but not really put off. "Let me take you out some time."

"No."

"But why not? It's not like you have a boyfriend."

Her face got a little hot at the mention of a boyfriend. She pushed him back and he was forced to take a couple steps away from her. "I'll tell you why not. Because you're just like every other boy I've ever met." *Except for Haku.* "You're just a dog in heat. You only want one thing and the only reason you keep after me is because like a dog you love the chase. If I ever gave you what you wanted, which I never will, you'd forget about me and chase someone else."

Kiba couldn't help but laugh. "Well I do like the chase that's true. But I don't think I could forget about a girl like you." She really was incredible with a firm athletic body and curves in all the right places. He'd been with a few girls, and he was willing to admit that the fact that she was hard to get only made him want her more. "Just give me one chance, I promise you won't be sorry."

She looked past him to where Haku and Gabrella were dancing. "Forget it; you're just not my type."

---

The cake was brought out. On top of it were a couple of wax candles in the form of a one and a seven.

"Make a wish and blow out the candles." Alysa said excitedly.

"All right." Tayuya smiled, she knew exactly what she wanted. She blew the candles out.

"What did you wish for?" Haku asked.

"She can't tell you or it won't come true." Alysa declared.

Tayuya grinned and gave Haku a little shrug. "You heard her."

---

The party was still going on inside but the two of them had managed to sneak out unnoticed. It was April and the night air was just a little chill. Gabrella didn't mind as it gave her an additional reason to get close to him. They were on a little bench in the rose garden; the roses had only just begun to bloom again. She was sitting on his lap and leaning into his strong warm body. Her arms were wrapped around his neck and her lips were merged with his. Haku pulled her just a little closer and held her just a little tighter. They were happy. This was their refuge from all the world's problems. In each others arms their worries could be forgotten and for a short while they could just be happy.

---

From a second story window Tayuya watched the happy couple make out. She really hated that superior stuck up rich bitch. She was also jealous as hell. Not because of Gabrella's family, or ability, or wealth, or beauty. But just because she had the one thing Tayuya really wanted, Haku's love. She walked away from the window and decided it was time to go home.

---

Kushina was lying out in the parlor surrounded by paper plates; half empty cups, and discarded wrapping paper. The servants would clean everything in the morning. She'd already put Alysa to bed. Haku had gone out. Shinzou, Anko, Misaki, and Aoi had gone to their rooms in the west wing. She felt a disturbing certainty that Shinzou and Anko would still be up for awhile.

There was a sudden puff of smoke and Gamakichi appeared in the hallway. She got up to greet her visitor.

"I'd given up on seeing you today."

Gamakichi handed her the leather pouch. "Oh the boss just wanted to practice to make sure he had it down."

"What was he practicing?"

Gamakichi smiled. "Open the pouch and you'll see."

Confused she never the less did so. She was surprised to find that the usual letters and reports were missing. There was only one thing in the pouch. She pulled out a three pronged kunai with a special formula carved into the handle. She recognized it instantly, Minato had used them. They were the tools he used for his signature jutsu. Her eyes boggled.

"No! He couldn't have... could he?"

"He said you should put that on the floor somewhere and step back. He was going to cast the jutsu a couple minutes after I left."

Feeling a bit numb Kushina carefully put the three pronged kunai on the floor and took a couple steps back her eyes remained on the tri kunai. The jutsu her son was attempting was considered so complex as to be almost impossible to master. Jiraiya had given up on it years ago. It as rumored that Orochimaru had tried to copy it, only to fail miserably. This jutsu had made Minato more powerful than entire ninja armies. Any ninja who could master it would surely be considered the most powerful one in the village.

"Hah! I told pervy granddad I'd figure it out!"

Out of thin air he'd appeared. She saw a much taller and more muscled 15 year old Naruto standing in front of her. He was wearing his hitai-ite across his forehead and had on the red and black Uzumaki battle suit.

Seeing his mother Naruto gave her one of his huge smiles. "Hey mom! I wanted to surprise you and show you that I finally figured out how to make the Hiraishin no Jutsu work. Pretty cool, huh?" He stood there waiting for her reaction. His mother however was just standing there with her jaw open staring at him. He found the lack of a reaction sort of disappointing. "Uh, mom? Don't I even get a hug?"

That seemed to finally snap her out of it. She put her arms around her son and hugged him for all he was worth. It was a little shocking to her to see he was now as tall as she was. He had changed some, no doubt. But one thing would never change. "My baby's home!" She shouted and began planting kisses all over his face.

"Mooooom," he whined exactly like he always had. "I'm not a baby!"

She laughed, so unbelievably happy to hear those words from him. "Oh yes you are you're my baby and you always will be." She began covering his face with kisses again.

It was a long awaited return, Namikaze Naruto had come home.



# The Yellow Flash is reborn

**Author's Note:** I made a mistake last chapter and I am willing to own up to it. A bunch of you let me know that **Hiraishin no Jutsu** does not include smoke. O.k., my mistake. I will go back and edit the last chapter and in the future the jutsu will be without smoke. Oh by the way I was amazed at how many of you commented that you were hoping Jiraiya really would get skinned and dumped in salt. Damn, you people really are a bloodthirsty and evil bunch huh? Please don't ever change.

---

Hinata hurried back into the Namikaze mansion. She had been getting ready for bed when Kushina had called. As soon as she entered she saw a smiling Kushina standing by the kitchen door.

"So Gamakichi finally came?" Hinata asked eagerly. "Did Naruto-kun write me a letter?"

Kushina shook her head but her smile remained firmly in place. "No, but my son sent a gift instead. One I *know* you are going to like."

"A gift?" Hinata asked.

"Mmmm hmmm, but tell me something Hinata-chan, what would you have liked most?"

She shrugged. "I would love anything he sent me. The only thing I truly want is for Naruto-kun to be here."

"Cool, I got you the right gift." The kitchen door swung open. There smiling at her was Naruto.

Hinata gasped. "Naruto-kun!" She leapt and glomped onto him. "Naruto-kun you're home!"

He laughed. It felt so good to have his beautiful Hinata-chan back in his arms again. And he hadn't missed the fact that in their time apart she had... developed some. "Yeah I'm home Hinata-chan," he squeezed her tight. "I'm home."

She turned her face up and he brought his lips down to meet hers. It was an eager kiss, a welcoming kiss. For both of them it was a reminder of what they'd had and a welcome preview of what the two of them would share together.

Sighing happily she pressed her face into the side of his neck. "I am so happy Naruto-kun; I've missed you so much."

He squeezed her just a little bit tighter. "I missed you too my sweet Hinata-chan."

She looked up at him with her pale eyes filled with love. "Please don't ever leave me again."

His smile faded just a little. "You know I can't promise you that Hinata-chan, being a ninja I can't always choose. But I'll promise to never leave you again by choice."

It wasn't what she'd wanted, but she nodded, she understood and it would do. She leaned forward and they began to kiss again.

---

Kushina quietly left to give the reunited couple some privacy. She decided she could give them one night without any protective surveillance.

---

There was a knock on her door. Surprised she hurried to answer it, knowing who was there.

"Haku, what are you doing here?"

He smiled at her. "You left your party so early I wanted to just make sure everything was all right."

Tayuya gave him a smile. "I'm fine; do you want to come in?" Nodding he entered her apartment. He actually visited her often they spent a great deal of time together, as friends. "Do you want some tea?"

"Yes please." Haku sat down on the couch as he usually did while she headed into the kitchen. "Did you like your party?"

She filled a kettle with water and tossed in a tea bag. "It wasn't too bad I guess. I certainly made out like a bandit." She put the kettle on the stove. "Thank you for buying me a new flute, I love it."

"Why did you throw Kiba's present at him?"

"Because he's a f#&king pervert who thinks he's going to get me and he's never gonna." She sat down next to Haku.

"Is he really that bad?" Haku asked. "I think Kiba is a good guy."

"You would, he's not trying to sleep with you."

Haku grinned. "If he were I'd take it as a compliment."

Tayuya laughed and shook her head. "I am going to tell him you said that."

He smiled and looked closely at her. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "Never better."

"Then why did you leave so soon?"

She shrugged. "You know me, I'm not exactly a party girl. I like this better."

He nodded. One of the reasons he came over so often was because he knew how much she enjoyed it. He enjoyed it too. He just wished his spending time with her did not bother Gabrella as much as it did.

They talked for a bit until the kettle began to whistle. Tayuya got up and poured them each a cup.

As he drank some and placed his cup back down. "You know, there's something I wanted to ask you."

"What?"

"What did you wish for?" Haku looked at her intently. "You looked like you were really thinking about it before you blew out the candles."

She shook her head. "If I tell you it won't come true." She sighed a bit sadly. "Not that I think it will come true anyway."

"Whatever your wish is I would like to help you get it."

She looked at him and her face began to gain some color. "Do... do you really mean that? If you could help me get my wish would you really help or are you just saying that?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Tayuya we are not only teammates but really close friends. If I can help you get something you really want then I would."

She looked away from him and instead stared at the cup she was holding. She hesitated for a bit before mumbling something in a small voice.

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

Her hands were shaking a bit so she set her cup down on the table. Inside her heart was pounding like mad. She was scared. She took a deep breath and quietly repeated what she had said. "My wish was for you to kiss me."

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Under a night sky the two of them were kissing. They were sitting on their favorite bench surrounded by roses.

As they pulled apart just a bit Naruto let a single hand run along her outer thigh. The feel of his touch made her shiver just a bit and she pressed her self just a little more against his strong muscled body.

"You're so beautiful Hinata-chan." He let his hand rest there on her thigh as he spoke teasingly in her ear. "You've always been beautiful, but now you've become a woman."

She could feel her heart pounding within her and knew her face had to be completely red. "Arigato Naruto-kun, you've gotten much more handsome. You really look like a man." She paused but decided to go ahead. "Naruto-kun, there was something I wanted to talk to you about. It's something I didn't want to put in a letter."

"What is it Hinata-chan?" He asked curiously.

"Well, you know your uncle has been allowed to marry three wives in order to repopulate his clan."

"Yeah I know," he actually shuddered a bit. "I still can't believe that *Anko* is my aunt now."

Hinata nodded and looked down. "Well... the fact is that you're in the same position with your clan." She took a deep breath. "Do you, well, ah think you might want to, uhm..."

"Hinata-chan." He whispered and she stopped, she looked up and focused completely on those perfect blue eyes and gentle smile. "Are you worried I might want to have more than one wife?"

She nodded. "I would understand if..."

Whatever she was about to say she never got the chance as he leaned in and cut her off with a kiss. "Hinata-chan," he said tenderly.

"You're my only one. I love only you and you're the only one I want to have a family with and grow old with."

"I love you too Naruto-kun, with all my heart." Hinata answered with relief.

He grinned at her and they began to kiss. For him there could never be anyone else but her. Blissful and content she welcomed him home. For both of them their hearts were now whole again.

---

"You want me to kiss you?" Haku said nervously.

"That's right. That's what I wished for. To have you kiss me just once the way you do *her* ."

"Tayuya, you know I care about you, but it would be wrong."

She looked away from him feeling hurt and stupid. "Yeah, I know. Why the hell would you want to kiss someone as plain and foul mouthed as me when you have your perfect little princess?" *Why did I f#&king tell him? What the f#&k was I thinking? Like he would ever really wanna kiss me.*

"Tayuya I've told you before that she's not a princess. She's had a lot of problems she's had to deal with."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm sure her life has been really f#&kin' brutal. Much harder than mine or yours." He always defended her. Tayuya's heart sank as she knew there was no contest. Gabrella had his love and there was no way she could even compete. "Listen just forget it. It's not like I ever thought it would really happen."

There was an awkward silence between them as they both just sat there. Haku eying her carefully while she kept her eyes locked on the cooling tea in front of her.

"Was that truly your wish?" Haku asked quietly.

"Yeah it was."

"Very well."

She felt his hand gently touch her cheek. She looked over to him and saw him slowly leaning over towards her. "What are you doing?" She said in a husky whisper as his face drew near hers.

"I said I would help you get your wish, and I will." He kissed her.

She shut her eyes and drank in the warmth and softness of his lips. It was a short kiss, but a real one. It seemed to last forever, but was still over too soon. As he slowly released the pressure and pulled away she opened her eyes to look at him. His eyes were tender but she could see the trace of guilt. His hand stroked her cheek and withdrew.

"Happy birthday." He got up from the couch. "I should go now."

She quickly stood as well. Reaching out she took hold of both his hands. "You don't have to go. You can just stay and talk if you want." *Or **anything** else you might want to do.*

He shook his head and carefully withdrew his hands. "I don't think that would be wise." He took a deep breath. Tayuya I care for you very much, but only as a friend and teammate. But I love Gabrella, even with the obstacles we face my heart is hers. What I did just now was to give you your wish, but my heart is still hers."

Tayuya nodded. "I understand," she said quietly. "Don't worry I won't cause you any trouble with her and I'll keep our kiss a secret if that's you want."

"Thank you Tayuya you are a very dear friend and precious person." He quietly left.

Left alone she headed off to bed with a slight smile on her lips. She was still only a friend to him, but he had still kissed her. *I guess some*

*wishes really do come true.*

---

Early the following morning Kushina and Naruto had gone to meet with Tsunade. Not surprisingly Naruto was eager to relate how he had managed to teleport across fourteen hundred miles using his father's signature jutsu.

"So Jiraiya, grand uncle Saishu, and Yamato will be back in about a week." Naruto smiled and rubbed the back of his head. "I didn't want to wait and I wanted to make a big impression."

Tsunade quirked an eyebrow. "You mean like when you took on half of Iwa all by yourself?"

Naruto looked embarrassed. "It wasn't half of Iwa it was *only* a couple hundred or so ANBU."

Tsunade and Kushina shared a look. "Naruto," Tsunade tried to explain. "Do you understand that when you go out of your way to show off your power all that you're really doing is making yourself a bigger target?" She took out a simple book and handed it to him. "That is a copy of the Iwa Bingo book. You're listed on page twenty two, take a look."

He eagerly flipped to the aforementioned page. He immediately looked disappointed. "Aw man they don't have a very good picture of me." He thought of something. "Hey, do you think if I sent them a picture..."

"NO!!" Both women said at once. "Naruto," his mother scolded. "You are not supposed to try and help your enemies identify you."

"Let's try and keep on track." Tsunade said. "Naruto what is listed under your entry?"

He quickly read off the highlights. "Only son of Namikaze Minato, also known as the Yellow Flash of Konoha... jinchuriki container of



the nine tail Kyuubi demon... Killed three hundred Suna ninjas during the battle of Konoha including the Kazekage... Wind type, specialty jutsus include kage bushin, rasengan, and kamikaze... Fifth level blade master... has a fifteen million ryo bounty to be paid if killed or captured." His smile suddenly got wider and his voice was excited. "An S-ranked opponent he is **extraordinarily** dangerous. All Iwa ninjas are ordered to **retreat on sight**. " He handed the book back. "That's great! They have a retreat on sight order for me just like they did for my dad!"

Tsunade shook her head. "Naruto you are completely missing the point! All your enemies understand just how dangerous you are. That means that when they come after you, and they *will*, they are going to be just that much more cautious and better prepared."

"But godmother, how can I become Hokage without making a name for myself? I have to be recognized as the best ninja in this village. I'm not going to do that without the other villages knowing who I am too."

Tsunade sighed. "That's true Naruto, but there's a difference between earning a well deserved reputation and taking stupid risks." Seeing his stubborn look she sighed. Naruto *hated* looking weak that was one aspect of being a ninja he'd never really embraced. "All right, we'll talk more about this another day. But I have in mind a very special demonstration that will involve you showing off your skills in a productive manner." She sent her godson a very eager smile. "How would you like to show off your new jutsu to a few people?" From his smile she knew she wouldn't have to ask twice.

---

Training ground 17 had been closed off and was secured by several squads of ANBU. A very special demonstration was about to take place. In a thick forest fifteen ninjas each picked up a lily and quickly hid themselves. Their instructions had been clear. They were to disguise their presence to the best of their ability while remaining within the training ground and holding on to one of the lilies. A couple used genjutsu while most were satisfied in taking expert cover within

tree branches or bushes. They were all elite ninja and most skilled at concealing themselves.

In a clearing in the very center of the training ground Tsunade looked at her watch. The five minutes she'd given them were up. She turned to her godson with a grin. "Show them all what you can do Naruto."

He nodded, that was all the permission he needed. He ran through the complex hand signs. "**Hiraishin no Jutsu.**" He blinked away for just a handful of seconds. Then appeared again in the exact same spot as if nothing had happened. He opened his hands and the tops of fifteen lilies fell to the ground.

---

All fifteen members of the Council were gathered before Tsunade and Naruto. They all still held the stems of the flowers they had taken. Every single one had been cut neatly in an instant while in the hands of a ninja. None of them had seen anything more than a momentary blur. Most of the council members looked stunned, a handful wore smiles.

Tsunade put a proud hand on her godson's shoulder. "I trust this demonstration was sufficient proof for all of you?"

Danzo looked absolutely stunned. "The Yellow Flash of Konoha is reborn." He'd spoken quietly but in the stillness everyone had heard him. Heads began to nod.

Tsunade nodded happily. If an arch enemy like Danzo was in awe this would likely go the way she hoped. "Naruto has just completed his extended apprenticeship with Jiraiya and you can see the time was not wasted. He has mastered the legendary Hiraishin no Jutsu, the only ninja other than his father to ever do so. With this extraordinary ability you will all agree that Naruto is now one of our village's elite shinobi *even without* use of the Kyuubi's chakra." She paused and was pleased as again most heads nodded. It was time to play her cards. "I formally call the question and ask each of you to state your vote."

"You vote in the middle of a training ground? We should schedule a formal meeting for something so important." Riyuki stated.

*And give you a chance to scrape up enough votes to block? Oh I don't think so!* "As Hokage I am well within my rights to call for a vote whenever there is a quorum of the Council available. All fifteen members are present and there is no rule about where a vote may take place."

Before Riyuki could object Kushina spoke up. "On behalf of the Namikaze clan I vote yes!"

The newest member of the council sent his nephew a wink and a grin. "The Uzumaki clan says yes."

Shikamaru grinned. "Even though it's going to be troublesome, the Nara clan says yes."

"The Yamanka clan says no." Mishio said flatly.

"Akimichi says yes." There were a few frowns as the traditional Ino-Shika-Cho unity was nowhere to be seen.

Tsume barked an easy laugh. "Inuzuka says yes, my son would never talk to me again if I said anything else."

"No." Uchiha Riyuki let the stem fall to the ground.

"It is only logical, Aburame says yes." Shibi spoke.

Danzo nodded. "You truly are the strongest now. I say yes."

Koharu opened her mouth as though to argue, but said nothing. She looked at the stem she still held. She let out a weary sigh. "Yes."

Asuma tossed his cigarette down and crushed it beneath his heel. "If my dad were here he'd be very proud of you Naruto. Sarutobi says yes."

The remaining council members said yes and just that easy it was finally done. Tsunade had to keep herself from jumping up and down. The Hokage had to have *some* dignity after all. "By a vote of thirteen to two we have more than the two thirds majority required and thus the resolution is formally passed into law." She turned to her godson and addressed him directly. "Namikaze Naruto, it is my wish and the wish of the council that you be formally recognized as my successor. Will you accept this responsibility?"

It was what he had dreamed of since being a small child. "I will! And I promise I will make you proud of me!"

"Naruto I don't doubt that for a second." Tsunade said joyously.

---

As most of the Council members approached Naruto to congratulate him Riyuki quietly departed. It now seemed certain that one day, not immediately but soon, Naruto would become the Rokudaime Hokage.

"Though things can happen between now and then." He said quietly and to himself.

## A five pound bag of salt

"Gabrella, please come into my study."

She looked at her father a bit nervously. He was using *that* tone, the one he used whenever he was going to talk to her about something unpleasant. "Actually dad I was just about to go. Can we talk about this later?"

He shook his head. "We've put this off long enough. You've had months."

"But..."

"In my study please."

"Yes father." Gabrella trudged into the study behind her father.

Sitting behind his desk he waited for his daughter to take a seat before beginning. "You'll be turning eighteen in June, just a couple months away."

"Yes." She eyed him nervously.

He decided to come to the point. "We need a decision on who you intend to marry by then."

"Why?" She demanded. "Dad I'm only going to be **eighteen** most girls don't get married until they're in their twenties. Why am I getting forced into this? Why can't I just make my own decision in my own good time?"

"You already know the answer to that."

"Because I'm an Uchiha." She grumbled.

But her father shook his head. "No, because you are ninja and because you are in a clan. Honey, you should understand this perfectly. You never even knew your mother. No matter how skilled we may be a ninja's life is *always* uncertain. We are not afforded the luxury of taking our time if we wish to have children. Also as you are a part of a clan you bear the additional responsibility of providing future members of the *Uchiha* clan."

"Well now we really come down to it." She took on a stubborn look. "This is all about Haku isn't it?"

Again her father shook his head. "What this is about is identity and family. The clan needs to know whether after you are married if you will be an Uchiha or a Momochi."

"Why does it matter?"

He leaned back in his chair. "Tell me something daughter, who is the clan heir of the Hyuga?"

"Hyuga Hanabi."

"Yes, but her older sister Hinata was the one originally designated. Now why do you suppose Hiashi changed the designation?"

She could see where this was going. "Because Hinata was betrothed to Namikaze Naruto."

"And why was she not permitted to remain clan heir?"

Gabrella sighed. "Because once she is married she and her children will not be considered Hyuga but Namikaze."

"True, now what if she had married a ninja who was not a clan member or married a rich merchant or minor noble?"

"Then her husband would likely have changed his name to Hyuga. Hinata would have become heir and her children would have been part of the Hyuga clan."

Her father again nodded. "So you can see it is not really because you are an Uchiha, but rather that you are a member of a ninja clan. Now you have been given a great deal of leeway in the matter so far. But as an Uchiha and especially as clan heir you have certain responsibilities that you will not be allowed to put off indefinitely. You need not marry immediately, but the clan requires that you come to some sort of decision by the time you are eighteen. I am not speaking just on my own behalf, the elders are also insistent in you reaching a decision."

"What if I refuse to make a decision? What will you do? Throw me out of the clan?"

Riyuki sighed. "Don't be so melodramatic. Do you think you are the first or last clan kunoichi to ever be in this situation? No one wants to expel you, but you will no longer be designated the heir. I know how strong your feelings for Haku are and that they are returned. Have the two of you discussed marriage?"

She blushed a bit and slowly nodded. "He hasn't proposed but we've talked about it in general."

He waited but she did not go on. "And?"

"And he wishes to form his own clan." She said quietly.

"I see. And what do you want?"

"I want to be with him. But I also want to be able to change the Uchiha clan for the better. We need to change dad. There's a reason for all the things that have gone wrong in the last few years. We need to change our mindset and the way we see ourselves. We need to stop being separate from the rest of the village."

Riyuki frowned. "Dear, we are separate. We are a special elite of the village. It is important that we not forget that. There is after all a reason for the wall that surrounds the compound. The events

surrounding Itachi and Sasuke were tragic, but they don't change the fundamental truth."

Now it was Gabrella who shook her head. "No father, what happened to Sasuke and Itachi was a result of our misguided obsession with the sharingan and with our status as an elite. I am sure that if they had been born into other clans they would have been happier."

Her father shrugged, dismissing the idea. "Happiness is no part of being a ninja."

Those words reminded her of what Itachi had once said to her. *Happiness has nothing to do with being a ninja.* "That is not true father. Kushina is the strongest and finest kunoichi I have ever met. She is a powerful ninja and truly fierce and terrible when in battle. But she loves and laughs and jokes. She believes that happiness and duty are not exclusive. She is not the only one, *most* of the other clans feel that way."

"So you would try and make us like the other clans? Honey we are Uchiha."

Gabrella frowned. "Which is the same as saying we are special. Tell me dad why was I so unimportant one day and so special the next? Was I really so different just because I got my sharingan? Dad can't you see the problem of a clan that turns its back on its members just because they don't activate their kekkei genkai? Don't you see the problems caused by having your value as a clan member judged solely by whether or not you have a sharingan?"

"Gabrella, I am truly sorry that you suffered while waiting to achieve the sharingan. But achieving the sharingan is vital and it is only proper that achieving it be treated as a high priority."

"Even to the point of making a perfectly good ninja feel worthless just because she hasn't?" She stopped and took a deep breath. "Father I disagree with our entire philosophy and want to change it. And the



very first thing I'd do as clan head would be to tear down the wall outside our compound."

Riyuki gave her a surprised look. "Tear down the wall? Honey do you have any idea the opposition you would face if you tried to do that?"

"It needs to be done whether people oppose it or not, and it would just be the start."

"Gabrella you would have a better chance of walking up a waterfall then of changing the Uchiha clan in the way you want."

"It needs to be done dad, and I mean to do it."

"Well, if you are clan head you can *try*. But not if you marry into another clan. The choice is yours daughter."

---

At the Namikaze mansion there was a celebration going on to both welcome Naruto home and to honor his appointment as Tsunade's successor. Since he had arrived late the previous night and left early to meet with Tsunade this was his first meeting with most of his extended family. Kakashi and Kiba had also come by so that they could have a little reunion of team seven.

---

"So you've been apprenticed to niisan all this time huh?" Naruto asked.

Kiba nodded. "Yeah it's been great! We've gone out on a bunch of really tough missions, I've learned to summon his nin dogs, and he taught me a bunch of new jutsus."

Hinata had her arm around Naruto's. "He has also fallen for someone."

"Oh really?" Naruto grinned.

"Hey come on, Hinata-chan it's not like that at all." Kiba looked as though he wanted to run.

"So who's the lucky girl?" Naruto asked.

"Tayuya." Kiba muttered.

"Tayuya? The ex-Sound ninja who curses like a sailor? *That* Tayuya?"

"Hey! She doesn't curse that much any more and she's really changed!"

Hinata giggled. "Coming to her defense Kiba?"

Naruto held up his hand. "That's all right; I mean if you like her that's fine. So she's your girlfriend?"

Kiba looked a bit embarrassed. "Not exactly."

"O.k. so you're dating casually?"

"Well, technically we're not actually dating."

"So you're just close friends?"

"Well, I don't really know if we're that either." Kiba admitted.

Naruto just looked at his friend and teammate. "So what exactly are you two?"

"Well I'm sort of trying to get her attention. I keep trying to ask her out but she keeps saying no. So I've decided to keep trying to win her over and be near her whenever I can."

Naruto slowly began to smile. He suddenly pointed at his friend. "You're Tayuya's fan boy! " He laughed.

"I am not!" But the more vehemently Kiba denied it the more Naruto laughed.

---

"This is for you." Naruto handed her a hand crafted porcelain doll dressed in a pink kimono. "I got it for you in Nagano."

Alysa screeched in delight as she accepted the gift. "Arigato niisan!" She gave him a hug. "I'm so glad you're home again!"

"Me too." He reached down to return her hug. As he hugged her he picked her up.

"Eek!" She quickly settled onto his shoulders. "Niisan! I'm much too grown up to be riding on your shoulders."

"Oh really?" Naruto grinned at her. "Then I guess you're too grown up to want to braid hair."

"That's different! Will you let me braid your hair niisan?"

"Yes... just as soon as everyone has gone home." He laughed at his imouto's shouts of joy.

---

"So you like Tayuya?" Kushina smiled as she approached him.

"It's not like that!!" Kiba insisted.

"Kiba," Kushina stated. "It's not really a secret. It's been obvious for awhile now. I was just wondering, why did she throw your present at you?"

"Well I think she mad that I got her some sexy panties." Kiba admitted. He saw Kushina's face blanch. "What?"

"Kiba where on earth did you get the idea that *panties* would be an appropriate gift?"

"Sensei suggested them."

"Oh he would." Kushina shook her head and muttered something about perverts. "Listen Kiba, if you want to try and impress a girl you should try and show her you're interested in something she cares about."

"Like what?"

"Well in Tayuya's case she loves music. Can you sing or play an instrument?"

"I can't sing, but I used to play an instrument when I was younger. I stopped a couple years ago."

"That's perfect! Why don't you practice with your instrument and then play it outside her window one night?"

Kiba looked at her. "Isn't that sort of weak?"

"No! It's romantic! Every girl dreams about being serenaded. If you do it then I guarantee that she'll definitely notice you."

"Hmmm, maybe..."

---

He saw Anko in the kitchen snacking on some dango. He hadn't really spoke to her yet and so decided to try and welcome her into his family.

"Hello aunt Anko I was just..." His mouth snapped shut as a kunai flew past his head. He could feel a slight burn where it had just cut his cheek and a little bit of blood began to leak out.

"Hi there!" Anko said in a chipper voice and with a smile. "First rule, don't call me aunt it makes me feel old. Second..."

As if materializing Kushina appeared behind Anko and grabbed the back of her head pulled it back as she placed a kunai to her throat.

"Second rule," Kushina spoke with anger in her voice. "Don't **ever** attack my son again or draw his blood. I've killed people for a lot less than that." She let go and put away her kunai.

Anko grinned, not seeming to be bothered in the least. "Wow, and I thought I was a scary bitch." She turned to Naruto. "It's nice to see you again Naruto." She hummed as she exited the kitchen.

Naruto wiped the blood off his cheek. "She scares me."

Kushina nodded. "She scares everyone dear."

---

"You doing o.k. Haku?"

His friend nodded. "Welcome back home Naruto, and congratulations on being name successor."

"Thanks, it's a dream come true. So why are you hanging out by yourself?"

"Well, I have been pondering something." He was silent for just a bit. "Do you think it would be selfish of me to want to found my own clan?"

"Are you kidding? Of course not! I think it would be great!" Naruto said. "Wait, why don't you look happy?"

"Because there are issues I have to consider. Naruto," Haku paused and then asked. "What would you have done if Hinata had refused to marry you unless you joined her clan?"

"Hinata would never have done that."

"Very well, what would you have done if Hiashi-san had made it a condition to marrying her?"

Naruto had never once considered that so he stopped to give the question some real thought. "I think," he answered slowly. "That if I

had a brother or someone else to carry on the family name I would agree. I love her that much. But, being the only Namikaze I couldn't let the clan die with me. If I did that I would be failing not just my father but all my ancestors who were Namikaze as well. I couldn't let that happen."

"Not even for Hinata?"

"I'm not saying it would be an easy choice or something I'd want to do." Naruto confirmed. "I know it would break my heart. But I couldn't let my clan die, not even for her. As much as I love her, for a ninja some times duty must come before all else even love. It's like when godmother says she's acting as the Hokage when she puts the people she loves in danger for the sake of her duty."

Haku slowly nodded. "Thank you Naruto, that helps some."

---

One week later

"Uhm Tsunade," a very nervous Jiraiya asked. "Why are we meeting in ANBU headquarters?" Tsunade gave him a smile that only made him more nervous.

"Well you know when I found out you had taken my godson into a ninja village filled with people who hate him and would kill him on sight I was very angry with you."

"Now Tsuande I can explain."

The Hokage didn't miss a beat. "But then of course he did learn a great deal while traveling with you and I'm willing to admit his becoming successor is largely due to your help."

Jiraiya let out a relieved sigh. "So you're not mad at me anymore, right?"

Tsuande smiled and showed all her teeth. "Well now I wouldn't say that." She took something out and placed it on the table in the room.

"What is the five pound bag of salt for?"

"Just be glad it's not a barrel."

"Huh?"

Tsunade produced a scalpel. "Now hold out your right arm and we'll get started."

Fortunately for all of Konoha his screams could not be heard through the thick walls.

---

Karin leaned back on the couch and had another glass of champagne. It had taken almost three more years of additional research and effort, but the day had finally come. As she relaxed there was a knock on the door to her penthouse.

"May I come in?" A voice called to her.

"Of course," Karin shouted. "It's not locked."

The door opened and in strolled a tall broad shouldered man with short cropped blonde hair. He wore well shined plate armor with a large crest with a golden hawk in flight. "I just wanted to inform you in person that the invitations have been sent out to our five prospective clients. Some or all of them should have their representatives here within two weeks."

Karin nodded pleased. "Thank you Lord Taka. How much do you think we will make?"

"For what you are selling the bidding will begin at 100 million ryu and where it will end I can only guess. After all you are selling the secrets of Orochimaru." He looked at her with an amused grin. "You realize

of course that whoever gains this knowledge will become far more powerful. You are very likely to tip the balance of power in the ninja lands."

She shrugged and had another sip of champagne. "Just so long as I get to be rich I don't really care."



## An invitation from Lord Taka

"Say, Naruto, now that you've been designated my successor how would you like to get a taste of what being Hokage is like?" Tsunade asked with an innocent look on her face.

"Really?!" Naruto answered excitedly.

Tsunade nodded, careful not to smile too broadly. "Oh absolutely! Now that you are officially recognized as my successor I'm permitted to train you and get you some experience in the position. Why as successor you're even allowed to perform as an acting Hokage for certain tasks."

Naruto's eyes lit up. He saw himself wearing the Hokage robes speaking to a room filled with clan heads. Their attention wrapped around his every word. "That would be wonderful godmother thank you so much!"

*Heh, heh, heh.* "Don't mention it Naruto. So why don't you come by the tower at 7 a.m. and we'll get started."

"I'll be there!"

---

Tayuya was lying on her couch just relaxing and listening to some jazz. It had been a weird day. She'd spent a couple hours with her team on a minor C-rank. The mission itself had been nothing of note. What had made it odd was the way that Haku and Gabrella had been relating to each other. Their usual close bond had been completely missing today. When they had talked it had been strained and most surprising of all she couldn't remember them holding hands even once. Something was going on between those two.

As she lay there replaying the day's events and listening to the smooth music her peace of mind was disturbed by a loud series of

crashes and booms. Not too much later she heard a bunch of shouts from her neighbors.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm calling the military police."

"People are trying to get some rest here!"

"Take your big dog and get out of here!"

*Big dog? Oh no, it couldn't be!* She got up from her couch and went over to her window. Opening it she stuck her head out to look down into the courtyard. "Oh you have got to be f#&king kidding me!"

There in the courtyard was Kiba sitting on the back of Akamaru. Somehow or other he had managed to set up an entire drum kit, including symbols, attached to a saddle. He was playing a rendition of what she thought was a love song on his drums. He was actually not too bad, but the effect of the romantic tune was sort of lost in the loud bams and smacks of the drum and repeated crash of the symbols.

"Kiba!" Tayuya shouted down at him. "What the hell are you doing?"

Kiba stopped and smiled up at her. "Hey Tayuya! I've come to serenade you."

"What?!"

"I've come to serenade you." He repeated.

Tayuya suddenly noticed glares from her many neighbors being turned in her direction. "Well don't!"

"Will you go out with me?" He called up.

"No! I will not f#&king go out with you! Now get out of here and stop bothering me!"

With a big grin he began to hit the drums again.

"What the f#&k are you doing?"

"I'm going to keep serenading you until you agree to go out on a date with me."

A dark look crossed her face. "Like hell you are." She went back inside for a minute and got some of her ninja gear together. Returning to the window she tossed some kunai.

Kiba noticed some pieces of paper attached to them. "Crap! Move Akamaru!" Akamaru leapt away just in time to avoid the explosive notes.

"Don't come back you flea bitten mutt, and take your dog with you!"

Even as he was fleeing on Akamaru's back Kiba was laughing. "You're beautiful when you're angry!" He shouted back.

---

Naruto arrived at the tower well before 7 and was eager for his first real taste of the duty of being a Hokage.

"Oh my Naruto!" Tsunade said encouragingly as they met. "Don't you look excited? Well let's get to my office."

"Are you really going to let me be the acting Hokage, Hokage-sama?"

Tsunade nodded with a grand smile. "Oh absolutely!" They entered her office. "Would you like to sit behind my desk?"

"Sure!" He sat down in her chair. This wasn't the first time. She let him there a few times when he was little and pretend. But this was different. This time he had a legitimate right to be sitting there. Swinging the chair around he looked out the large window upon the village of Konoha.

"What do you think?" Tsunade asked with a hint of amusement.

He smiled at her absolutely content. "It's a nice chair and I like the view."

"Glad you approve." The office door opened. "Ah perfect timing."

A frowning Shizune entered. She was holding a stack of papers in her hands that climbed all the way to her chin. Maneuvering expertly she managed to get them to the desk without tripping. "Here are the morning reports that require the Hokage's signature and seal. You also have a full set of appointments so you'll want to get this all done by noon or you won't have time for lunch. And no slacking off Lady Tsunade! You're already a week behind on your paper work."

Tsunade smiled at her faithful assistant. "Oh I'm sorry Shizune but today Naruto will be acting as my stand in. He'll be acting Hokage for the day."

Naruto looked nervously at the stack of papers that had been set on the desk. "What are all these?" He asked nervously.

Shizune sent Tsunade a hard look. "You are not trying to lay all your work off on Naruto are you?"

"I'm just trying to get him a little experience." She went to the side of the desk and opened the top drawer. She pulled out a small rubber stamp and ink pad. "Now Naruto all these have been sent here to receive your signature and stamp to make them official. Shizune will answer all your questions and show you what to do. I'll see you later."

"Where are you going?" Naruto asked.

Tsunade laughed. "Probably back to bed. It has been awhile since I had a day off. I'll come back at seven when you get done for the day. If there's an emergency Shizune will know how to contact me. But **only** if there's an emergency." With that she departed.

Shizune sighed and shook her head. "I'm sorry about this Naruto, but we really do need all these papers to be approved by the Hokage before they can be put into effect."

He was staring at the stack of papers. "I really have to go through all theses?"

"There are five more stacks." Shizune stated. "And as I said you have appointments in the afternoon so really you need to get them done this morning."

"I see." Morosely he took the top sheet from the stack and grabbed a pen. "Do you suppose there's any chance some huge disaster will take place requiring the Hokage to risk his life for the village?"

"I doubt it, but we can always hope."

Sighing he stamped the first report and put it into the, 'out' box. "Well I always said I'd sacrifice myself for the village."

---

12:30

The Fire Daimyo's wife was sitting across from him. They were both sipping tea and having cookies. Shizune had explained to him that a part of the Hokage's duty was to maintain good terms with local and foreign dignitaries.

"It's wonderful that you're going to be the next Hokage. I can still remember what a polite young man you were all those times you brought back my sweet little Tora to me. I just know you'll do a fine job. You know I remember when your father was the Hokage, he was a very polite boy too and always filled with good humor. Of course Sarutobi was also a fine Hokage too, don't get me wrong. He was a bit more formal, but very polite. You know I remember..."

Naruto grinned and nodded at the appropriate points and spoke a total of perhaps a dozen words.

---

"I want a real mission! I am tired of D-ranks!" Konohamaru squatted on the floor and crossed his arms over his chest.

A flustered Ebisu waved his arms about in embarrassment. "Please forgive my honorable student's disgraceful behavior Naruto-sama."

"Konohamaru stop this!" Iruka barked. "You know you're still not experienced enough for anything above D-ranks."

Naruto shook his head and tried to keep a severe look on his face. "Oh really and just *why* do you deserve something above D-rank?"

"Because me and my team have awesome ninja skills and can handle a real mission!" Konohamaru declared.

Naruto grinned. "You really think you have great ninja skills?"

"Of course we do."

Naruto nodded. "All right, I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you and your team test. If you pass it I'll assign you a C-rank mission. But if you fail you're not allowed to complain or ask for another higher rank mission for at least a month. Deal?"

"It's a deal!" Konohamaru jumped to his feet and both his teammates looked excited. "What's the test?"

Naruto pulled out his watch. "You must go to Ichiraku's and return here with five bowls of miso ramen within ten minutes starting... NOW!"

With a blur three Genin raced out the meeting room. Ebisu, Shizune, and Iruka were all staring at him.

"What?" Naruto asked innocently.

"Naruto what are you thinking?" Iruka demanded.

"I'm thinking I skipped lunch and that cookies and tea aren't enough to fill me up."

"But what happens if they get back here in time?" Shizune asked.

"Relax," he pulled out a sheet of paper that had been in front of him. "There's a C-rank to escort a caravan with building supplies to a town just about fifty miles from here. It's as basic and simple a C-rank as you'll ever find. And they've done thirty D-ranks, they're ready."

---

3:30

"Well it's really troublesome, but I'm here to give my monthly progress report on the Chunin exams." Shikamaru noted lazily.

"Are we hosting those again?" Naruto asked.

Shikamaru nodded. "In just another month and a half."

"Well hopefully these will go a little smoother than the last ones."

"That's not exactly setting the bar very high."

Naruto shrugged. "As long as we don't get invaded again I'll be happy. So how are you and Temari?"

Shikamaru quirked an eyebrow. "Don't you want to hear about the preparations for the exams?"

"Are there any major problems?"

"No."

"Fine then, that's all I need to hear. So how are you and Temari?"

Shikamaru smirked a bit. "She is the most troublesome woman I have ever known and she manages to constantly turn my life upside

down almost on a whim."

Naruto grinned. "Sounds like you're in love."

Shikamaru sighed. "I'm afraid so."

---

6:30

"Naruto what are you doing here?" As was his habit Jiraiya leapt in through the window.

"Oh, hey pervy granddad. The Hokage let me spend the day doing her job."

Jiraiya grinned. "So let me guess she was way behind on her paper work and she got you to do it for her."

"Yeah," Naruto answered a bit wearily. "Say, why is your right arm covered in bandages from the wrist to the shoulder?"

"Oh that's to give the skin grafts a chance to heal."

"Skin grafts? Did you get wounded?"

"You might say that."

"Does godmother know?"

"Oh yeah she knows." Jiraiya said flatly. "By the way don't ever make her really angry."

"Uhm, o.k." Naruto scratched the back of his head.

"Anyway I came by here to give her some news."

"Is it top secret or something only she can hear?"



Jiraiya thought about it. "I'd best give it to her and she can share if she thinks it's a good idea."

---

7:00

Tsunade came back to her office smelling slightly of sake. "Well Naruto how did you enjoy your first taste of being Hokage?"

"I can honestly say it's not quite what I expected." He shook his head. "I managed to get all the paperwork done. So was this a normal day for you?"

She nodded. "It may have been a *little* heavy on the paperwork side but otherwise yes."

"You know I remember you and the third always complaining about paperwork but somehow I didn't really think about it."

"No one ever does, believe me when I first took over it came as a shock how much time I spent chained to my desk."

"So did you have me stand in for you to let me do all your work for you while you went out drinking?"

"Partially," she answered without feeling guilt. "I also wanted you to get a sense of what it was really like to be Hokage. I don't plan on retiring for a few more years yet but I wanted you to start getting an understanding of what the job really is. Ninety nine percent of the time this village runs smoothly and you really have nothing of importance to do. It's that one other percent where you truly earn your pay. When things do not run smoothly and the land is in crisis it will be your responsibility to set things right. If you are Hokage then you must always do what is best for Konoha, even when it means putting the people you love in danger."

"Like you did during the invasion?"

She nodded. "That's right."

"Speaking of danger." Jiraiya again popped in through the window.

"What do you want?" She asked with a frown.

"This is for you." He handed her a sealed envelope. "It was delivered by special messenger to one of my agents."

Tsunade opened the letter and began to read it. As she read it her frown deepened. "Naruto."

"Yes?"

"You know how I was just talking about the one percent of the time when as Hokage you must make hard decisions?"

He slowly nodded. "Is this one of those times?"

"I'm afraid so, Shizune!"

"Yes Lady Tsunade?" Shizune appeared as if by summoning.

"Please contact Kakashi, Hinata, and Kiba and have them all report here." She looked to Naruto and Jiraiya. "You two stay as well. I'm afraid your work day is not over yet Naruto."

---

"We are invited to send four representatives to the Isle of Torikae to participate in open bidding for the secrets of Orochiamru's curse seal." Tsunade read out. "Participants must arrive upon the isle by midnight of May first and must have in their possession the sum of 100 million ryu in cash along with a signed letter of granting a representative to both negotiate and sign contracts on behalf of the Hokage and the village of Konoha. The bidding shall take place on the third. The parties must hand over the 100 million ryu sum as a sign of good faith. The sum will be returned once the full amount of

the winning bid is received. The rules of Torikae shall be in full force. Respectfully, Lord Taka."

"Lord Taka and the Isle of exchange." Jiraiya muttered. "This should be interesting."

"Who is this Taka and what's this isle of exchange?" Kiba asked.

"Lord Taka rules the Isle of exchange, or the Isle of Torikae about twelve hundred miles off the coast. It's basically his own private little kingdom."

Tsunade smiled fondly. "It has some beautiful hotels and casinos."

Jiraiya nodded. "Yeah along with a whole lot of banks and his very own private police force of loyal ninja and a modern navy."

"So he's a casino owner and banker?" Kiba asked.

"In part." Kakashi replied. "What he mostly is, is a middleman. He arranges for exchanges or sale of goods for a commission and in return guarantees security and privacy."

"He sounds like a criminal." Kiba commented.

"Oh he is." Jiraiya confirmed. "But he is also Lord over all he surveys and a very powerful businessman."

"He sounds like Gato." Naruto said darkly.

"Well the important thing is that he is very powerful and we have to deal with him carefully. If this letter is true and the secrets of the curse seal are out there for sale we have to stop our enemies from acquiring it." She sighed and shook her head. "How do I explain taking a hundred million ryu out of circulation?"

"We're actually going to bring that much cash with us?" Naruto said in surprise.

"I'm afraid we'll have to. There's no way to get on that island without providing it." She looked at the team in front of her. "Kakashi, Naruto, Kiba, and Hinata; I am reactivating your squad under the new designation of team Kakashi. You're being assigned an S-rank mission. Go to the Isle of Torikae and determine if the information on the curse seal really is there. If it is then I want that information destroyed at all costs."

"What if we're able to retrieve it?" Kakashi asked.

"I don't want it." Tsunade stated. "I've seen what it does to the ninja it's inflicted on. I'm declaring it to be a forbidden jutsu and I want all information on it destroyed. Is that clear?" They all nodded. "Oh and one more thing, you're leaving with a very large sum of money. Make sure it comes back with you."

Jiraiya spoke up. "Also keep in mind that there will be other bidders out there so watch out for them as well."

---

The Tsuchikage waited as his servant entered his study.

"Yes Tsuchikage-sama?" Takuya bowed to his lord.

"We have an opportunity to acquire a great new weapon." He handed Takuya the letter he had just received. "Select three of your best men and so to Torikae and acquire the secrets of Orochimaru for Iwa. Steal them if you can, buy them if you must, no price is too high. But we must have this new power whatever the cost."

"I understand Tsuchikage-sama." He bowed and began to leave.

"Takuya."

"Yes Lord?"

"Do not fail me."

He bowed again. "I understand lord."

---

"What is it? You know I hate waiting."

Their leader ignored his tone. "You and your partner are leaving for the Isle of Torikae."

"Why?" He grumbled. "Are you sending us on a little holiday?"

"It seems Lord Taka has somehow acquired the secrets of the curse seal. As Orochimaru was once your partner I thought you might want to clean up this final bit of his mess."

"Feh, that traitor has been dead for years now and he's still causing trouble?" Sasori muttered.

"The curse seal might cause unexpected complications later. Go there and destroy all traces of the information." Pein commanded.

"That could be rather messy."

"Use your own best judgment as to how to go about it, but I want no trace of this information to remain."

"I understand." Sasori said and then began to laugh gruffly. "Deidra will probably enjoy himself ."

## Isle of Torikae

" *Another S-rank mission?*" Kushina said, clearly unhappy with the news. "I was hoping you'd get some time to get used to being in the village again. You've been home a little more than a week and Tsunade's got you leaving on another dangerous mission."

He tried to give her a reassuring smile. "Come on mom, I mean what other kinds of missions would she give me?"

"You know son there's nothing wrong with going on a mission that *doesn't* put your life in jeopardy."

"I'll be fine, and I'm going with my whole team so you know things will be all right. Besides with all my new abilities I can take on anyone."

She shook her head and spoke in a lecturing tone. "Naruto-kun that is a very dangerous attitude to have. It's true you've grown much more powerful, but that is nowhere near the same thing as being invincible. Confidence is a good thing, but arrogance is dangerous and I am afraid that's the direction you're headed towards."

"I'll be fine mom." He said with certainty. "After all, I'm not Hokage yet."

---

He was heading towards the gates with Hinata. The two of them walked hand in hand as they had since being children. As they walked Naruto looked around. The cliff wall had godmother's face of course. Other than that the village hadn't changed much during his absence. As they walked along people gave him plenty of room. He studied their expressions. A few sent him dirty or angry looks and a few gave him happy smiles. The vast majority just walked well around him without giving away their thoughts. Over all things had improved since he was a child. But he remembered how people had

looked at him right after the invasion, when most of them had seen him as a hero.

If most people no longer saw him as a monster, they also did not really view him as a hero either. Most seemed willing to just accept him as a part of Konoha. He supposed that was good, but a small part of him wanted to see their approval. He wanted them to cheer him as they had after the invasion. *When I am the Rokudaime they will cheer for me.*

---

"Before we go anywhere I have a present for each of you." Naruto told his team at the gates. (All the damage from the invasion had been repaired including the wall and gates.)

"This is your idea of a present?" Kiba asked. He looked at the weird kunai. "I hate to tell you this Naruto, but your taste in gifts sucks."

"Kiba be nice." Hinata chided.

Kakashi took the tri kunai and looked at it for a moment. "I haven't seen one of these in fifteen years Naruto." He spoke quietly. "You've really mastered *that* jutsu haven't you?"

Naruto nodded. "I have, but it's supposed to stay a secret for now. Only my godmother, Jiraiya, my grand uncle, Yamato, and the council know about it. The Hokage wants to try and keep it secret as long as possible."

"I can certainly understand why." He put the tri kunai away.

"Hey, what jutsu are you talking about?" Kiba asked.

"Don't worry about it Kiba you'll see it eventually I'm sure." Kakashi informed him and took out a little orange book.

"Oh! That reminds me." Naruto began to dig through one of his packs. "I got another gift just for you niisan. Here it is."

Kakashi sucked in his breath at the sight of what Naruto held in his hand. "Naruto, is that..."

Naruto nodded with a grin at his niisan's stunned reaction. "It's pervy granddad's newest edition. It has even been signed and won't be available in stores for another month."

Kakashi eagerly took the book and carefully opened it to page one. He sighed happily; it even had that new book smell! "Naruto, have I ever told you you're my favorite student?"

"Hey!" Kiba shouted and Akamaru began to bark.

---

It took them three days to reach the coast. There a speedy yacht waited for them. Boarding they spent an additional four days on the ocean. Giving them a bit of free time.

---

"I'll see your five million and raise you ten million more." Naruto said and tossed in stacks of ryu notes."

"Oh yeah?" Kiba shoved his entire pile into the space between them. "Well I'm all in."

"Fine," Naruto shoved a fortune into the middle as well. "Let's see 'em."

"I got a pair of eights." Kiba declared.

"No good," Naruto smiled laying down his cards. "I have three fours."

"Huh," he stared at the small mountain of cash. "Want to split it up and play again?"

Naruto shrugged. "Sure, why not?"

---

Hinata and Naruto were alone in his cabin.



"Naruto-kun," she pulled his hands down.

"Oh come on Hinata-chan, pleeeeeease." He gave her the puppy dog eyes.

She grinned and shook her head. "Your hands don't get to go there until I'm your wife."

"But that's not for a whole year yet." He complained.

She laughed. "Sorry Naruto-kun but I'm just not that kind of girl." She leaned in and kissed him again. "Once we're married though we can do *all* sorts of things." She purred evilly and made his heart race.

"Hey! Maybe we can get married while we're on the island!"

She laughed and kissed him again.

---

"Kiba what are you doing?" Hinata asked.

"What?"

"Why are you on the floor rolling around on the money?"

"Well when am I ever going to do this again?"

Kakashi sighed. "Put the money back in the chest Kiba."

---

When they were about fifty miles from their destination they picked up a shadow. A squat grey shadow with two square turrets and a pair of long cannon sticking out of each. On a mast above the bridge on the back of the ship a white flag with a golden hawk could be seen.

"One of Lord Taka's gunships." Kakashi said blandly. "One of those cannon can blow us out of the water at about three thousand yards. They're the most powerful ships afloat."

"It doesn't look that impressive." Naruto stated.

"What those guns can do is impressive." Kakashi replied.

"Hah! With my Lightning Fang I could tear right through it." Kiba declared.

"Only if you get close enough to use your jutsu." Kakashi shut his book with a snap. "All right we'll be docking in less than an hour. It's time for us to go over the rules of Torikae. Since we'll be in a foreign country we'll be expected to follow them. First off, the ninjas on the island are considered not only the police force but judge and jury as well and have the right to kill anyone at any time."

"What?!" Kiba shouted.

Kakashi simply nodded. "Like our own ANBU they consider themselves to be the personal weapons of Lord Taka and like their lord they are a law unto themselves. They have the right to kill anyone without fear of repercussion. A few minor lords have discovered this to their sorrow."

"How can they do that?" Naruto asked. "Just kill someone for no reason?"

"Oh they have reason, and so long as their Lord approves they don't have to worry about any sort of law. On the Isle of Torikae Lord Taka is the law. Now with that in mind there are certain rules that we will be expected to follow. Breaking any of which may lead to being attacked."

"What sort of rules?" Naruto asked.

"First off, illusion jutsus are strictly forbidden. That means no genjutsu and no henge. They don't like people being disguised."

"So they'll kill you for having a henge?" Naruto asked incredulously.

Kakashi nodded. "They're very serious about knowing just who is on their island. Secondly we are not to attack any of Lord Taka's people or any of our competitors for any reason. Other than that there's not too much you can't do on Torikae. It's a place of business but also a legendary play ground for those who can afford it, gambling, prostitution, and drug use are all perfectly legal there."

"There a drinking age?" Kiba asked eagerly.

"No," Kakashi replied sternly. "But we'll need to keep our wits about us at all times. So do not get yourself in a drunken stupor."

---

As they continued to approach the island two other vessels as well as two more gunships came into view. One of the other boats had the flag of the rock village while the other lacked any sort of insignia.

"Looks like our competition." Naruto muttered. "Damn rock nins."

"I wonder who the other ones are." Kiba said.

"Likely representatives of one of the other great powers." Kakashi said. "I doubt Lord Taka would even bother contacting the lesser villages. They don't have the necessary financial reserves. Do keep in mind though that we may have more competition waiting for us."

---

It was not long before the smudge on the horizon came clearly into view. The Isle of Torikae was not a large place. It was a strip of rock only a few feet above the ocean. It was about three miles long and perhaps half a mile wide at its thickest. Every possible inch of space seemed to be crammed with buildings and with tiny streets separating them. Many of the buildings were huge ornate structures rivaling anything to be found on the mainland. The most important buildings; government offices, private palaces, banks, casinos, and hotels had been built from pristine white marble. In the sunlight they seemed to almost shine. By comparison most of the rest of the buildings seemed to be tiny one story shacks put together with bits of

wood and brick and whatever else was available. It wasn't hard to see where the money was.

Along half the water's edge were long wooden piers stretching out into the ocean. Nearly every one of which had a variety of ships tied to it. Vast yachts were tied next to humble freighters and simple sailing boats. Despite the lateness of the day there was plenty of activity as goods and people made their way in and out.

The very last pier had been left noticeably empty and it was towards this one that their ship began to move. Naruto noted that along with the three gunships acting as escorts there were half a dozen more in the bay simply riding at anchor.

Their yacht was soon tied to the dock and team Kakashi had exited. Kiba rode the back of Akamaru with the chest sitting in front of him. The other delegates also exited their boats with chests presumably filled with cash. Out of the ship with the Iwa standard came four ninjas, none of whom Naruto recognized. Out of the other ship came two ninjas with black robes with red clouds on them. One was a squat bulky man with black hair and a black handkerchief around his face. The other was a tall rather effeminate looking blonde fellow. Naruto did not recognize either of them but recognized their clothing.

"Their Akatsuki!" Naruto growled and instinctively grabbed for his sword.

Kakashi swiftly got a hold of his wrist and kept him from pulling it out. "Naruto, no! This isn't Konoha you can't attack them."

The commotion did not go unnoticed and the two Akatsuki members approached them.

"Yeah, is there a problem here?" Deidra asked amused.

"You're with Akatsuki," Naruto accused. "You work with that traitor Itachi!"

"Uchiha Itachi is a member of our organization." The blocky fellow answered with a deep and gravelly voice. "Why is that a concern to you?"

"No reason!" Kakashi quickly answered. He sent Naruto a look pleading for him to remain quiet.

Naruto ignored it. "Itachi has come after me and the next time I see him I'm going to kill him instead of just taking his arm."

Kakashi groaned and Hinata and Kiba both looked a bit worried. The blocky Akatsuki member lowered his eyes to Naruto's right hand. There Itachi's ring was clearly visible.

"I see..." Sasori replied. "So you are the Kyuubi."

"I am *not* the Kyuubi! My name is Namikaze Naruto, future Hokage of Konoha."

"Our interest in you has nothing to do with the office of Hokage." Sasori spoke. "The concern of Akatsuki begins and ends with the nine tail demon fox you currently possess."

"Yeah," Deidra said eagerly. "Maybe we'll have time for a little side project."

Sasori sent his partner a firm look. "Our assignment does not involve retrieving the nine tail. We will handle our assignment; I have no intention of doing Itachi's work for him" With that the two of them headed down the pier.

The Iwa nins had viewed the entire display and themselves began down the pier without comment, though some hard looks were directed Naruto's way.

"Naruto," Kakashi spoke in a tight voice once the rock nins were past. "Why did you feel the need to tell them who you are? They

likely would have found out regardless, but there was no reason to help enlighten them."

Naruto took on a stubborn look. "I hate those bastards and I wanted them to know it."

Kakashi sighed. "Hate them by all means Naruto, but you should have done so silently and anonymously. Especially since we can't fight them here there was nothing to be gained by showing them such open hostility."

"No need to worry sensei, I can handle them if I need to."

Kakashi eyed him with real concern. "Naruto, I realize you're a lot stronger now. Particularly if you know *that* jutsu, but you need to watch this tendency you seem to have of showing off. If you're not careful, you'll eventually bite off more than you can chew."

Naruto grinned. "Don't worry I can deal with anything that comes."

---

At the end of the pier Lord Taka waited with fifty of his ninja. He and all of his ninja wore crests with a golden hawk in flight. In short order the money was all counted and the letters of authorization were all confirmed. As servants hauled away three chests glasses of champagne were produced.

"I welcome all of you to my home and invite you to enjoy yourselves and caution you to not break any of the laws here." Lord Taka spoke warmly with a glass already in his hand. "I have arranged suites for all of you and trust you will enjoy your stay here. The bidding shall take place at noon in the grand hall of my palace. Until then you are all free to do as you like."

---

As they entered their hotel suite Naruto looked around and smiled. "Wow! This is nice!"

Hinata nodded. "Do you want to do anything tonight?" Naruto sent her a questioning look and she started to giggle. "Not *that* ."

Naruto slowly smiled. "You know Hinata-chan; there *is* something I've always wanted to do."

"What's that Naruto-kun?"

"Well, I've always wanted to stroll into a casino with a beautiful woman on my arm."

Hinata smiled and felt her heart beat quicken just a bit. "That sounds like it might be fun Naruto-kun."

---

"What do we do about the Namikaze?" One of the Iwa ANBU asked.

"Nothing." Takuya replied evenly.

"Nothing?"

Takuya nodded. "We will not jeopardize our current mission solely to pursue revenge on him."

"But..."

Takuya gave his men a sharp look. He was not used to being questioned. "We will do **nothing** that puts this mission in jeopardy. Is that clear?"

He was answered with sullen nods. Feelings were still very strong even after more than a year, but they would obey him. For Takuya that was enough.

---

Sasori activated his astral projection jutsu and sent his consciousness thousand of miles away. Before his eyes the suite melted away to be replaced by an open road somewhere.

"Itachi."

Uchiha Itachi halted and looked at the image in surprise. "Yes? What is it that you want?"

"I have some information you might find interesting."



## Too Late

**Author's Note:** Hey everyone, as always I hope you all enjoy this chapter. I wanted to do a little shameless self promoting. It seems I have been nominated for best story and best author in a Naruto fanfiction contest. Any of you who would like to help me win can vote for me by going to the fanfiction site for: Jesse Briceno his id number is 1362644, (I tried to set up a direct link but teh system won't let me) and voting for me. Please vote for me; even though I am a heavy (pleasantly plump) guy and accounting student that doesn't mean I don't want to be the popular one. Help me be the cool kid everyone secretly hates yet longs to be. (If you do I'll send Kushina over to bake you some cookies.)

---

"This feels weird."

Hinata smiled. "Oh don't worry Naruto-kun, you look very handsome."

"It just feels strange to be walking around out in public without my sword or body armor."

When he had mentioned wanting to go to a casino Hinata had gone off on a short shopping trip. He was dressed in a white suit while she had on a slinky black evening gown. He still had his radio communicator and they both had a few kunai on them, just in case.

Konoha had no casinos or anything remotely similar. Stepping through massive oak doors they entered a different world. The light was over whelming, almost blinding. The air was heavy with cigar smoke and perfume. There were loud excited shouts as well as the constant noise of slot machines and of dealers crying out. Most of the patrons kept their eyes focused on the games they were playing but a few looked up and stared a bit.

"People are looking at us." Hinata noted.

But Naruto merely grinned at the beautiful girl that was on his arm. "No Hinata-chan, they're looking at you. A beautiful woman always draws attention."

She blushed a bit and smiled. "Arigato Naruto-kun."

From where they were they could see a vast ocean of blinking slot machines. Those didn't interest Naruto. It took a minute but he finally spotted what he was looking for further back. "Come on Hinata-chan." He led the way into the crowd.

---

Lord Taka sipped his champagne and tried to keep the smile from his lips. He looked at his guest. "That is a very interesting offer, but I am afraid I shall have to decline it."

Takuya set his own glass down. "May I respectfully ask why? I would think my offer an excellent one, 200 million ryu for the secrets you possess. Surely you do not expect to make more than that?"

"Ah, but you see that is the wonderful thing about the open market. Only when a commodity is made available for all can one learn what it is truly worth."

Takuya shook his head. "The Akatsuki are criminals and certainly have not come here to bargain in good faith. As for the contingent from Konoha you surely realize that the presence of the Namikaze is no accident? Their Hokage undoubtedly plans to take the secrets by force. That is if they are not first stolen by the Akatsuki."

Lord Taka took another sip. "I have over a hundred ninja here to protect what is mine." Takuya immediately began to laugh. "Have I said something funny?"

"You have never dealt with S-rank ninja before have you?" It was not really a question.

"I met Tsunade once a few years before she became Hokage." Lord Taka smiled at the memory. "She ran up a six figure bill. It was paid in full a short time after she skipped out."

"Yes, well Tsunade was inactive back then and trying to avoid trouble. Neither of which applies to the **three** S-rank ninjas you have in your midst currently. I happen to have seen both Naruto and Deidra in action. Believe me a hundred ordinary ninja are no match for them. Your best course of action would be to accept my offer and allow me to depart immediately with the information. Once they realize it is no longer in your possession you will be safe."

Lord Taka shook his head amused. "My dear sir, I have dealt with powerful men of all sorts before, including powerful ninja. I can deal with these as well."

Takuya shook his head. "You have no idea." He stood up. "Well I have made my offer to you. Should you change your mind contact me at any time."

Lord Taka waited patiently as his guest was escorted from his palace. "You can come out now."

From one of the many bedrooms connected to the grand hall a nervous Karin strode out. "You turned him down? What's wrong with you?"

"We will get more if we leave everything up to auction. Trust me."

She shook her head. "After my time with Orochimaru I know just how truly dangerous powerful ninjas can be. If there are **three** of them here I want no part of it. I didn't risk my life to escape Orochimaru just to get killed now. I say accept the offer."

"No." Lord Taka answered flatly. "Do not forget that it was I who funded your further research that allowed you to create a viable curse seal without the use of Orochimaru's DNA. We are equal partners in this matter and I say we shall go ahead."

"Aren't you worried what they might end up doing?" Karin asked.

"I have dealt with ninja before." He waved the problem away.

Karin frowned. She knew from painful experience that some ninjas were dangerous on an entirely different level than most. She had nearly died once before and had no intention of risking her life again. "I want out."

Lord Taka looked at her in surprise. "Now? When you are about to finally receive a massive fortune?"

"You can't spend it if you're dead. Pay me for my share and let me get out of here. You can do whatever you want with the information."

Lord Taka considered it. "Very well, I'll give you five million and you can leave immediately if you like."

"FIVE? Who the hell are you trying to fool? You just had an offer for 200! That means my share is worth a hundred million!"

"There are always heavy penalties when you try to cash in an investment before its date of maturity. If you want the full value of your labors you will have to remain until the auction is complete. The question is, just how badly do you wish to leave before that time?"

She seriously thought about staying. This was her life's work after all, and not too many people would easily walk away from the sort of money that was at stake. The problem was she'd learned to trust her survival instinct. Right now it was telling her not just to go but to run. Five million was still a hell of a lot of money. And you could live a hell of a comfortable life on it.

Karin nodded, her decision made. "All right."

Lord Taka grinned. He had honestly never thought the brilliant scientist to be a sucker, but she was. She was letting her weak

nerves steer her into a ridiculous financial decision. But that was fine, all the more for him.

---

Naruto was sitting at the poker table with a large stack of chips and Hinata standing behind him and rubbing his shoulders. He had originally brought 10,000 ryu with him. After about two hours of playing he had over 20,000 sitting in front of him.

"My Naruto-kun I think you've discovered your true calling. Maybe you should stop being a ninja and be a professional gambler." Hinata teased.

"Don't joke about that Hinata-chan. When I was growing up my godmother was always trying to talk my mom letting her bring me to a casino with her."

"Is that why you're so good at this?"

"Well my godmother and granddad both say I have good gambling instincts."

As they watched a new player sat down at the table. He was a teenager with sharp red hair and a calm look to him. Sitting down his eyes were focused on Naruto. Naruto noticed and looked back at the stranger. The only thing Naruto had on that showed he was a ninja was his hitai-ite.

"Do you mind if I join the game?" The red head asked. He began putting a large number of chips down on the table.

"Not at all." Naruto replied.

"My name is Stallos; I am a merchant from Wind country." Sasori said as the dealer dealt out the cards.

Naruto nodded politely. "My name is Naruto and this beautiful lady is Hinata."

"I am pleased to meet you." Hinata stated.

"I see you both wear the leaf hitai-ites. Are you both ninja?" Naruto nodded. "Here on a little vacation?"

"Actually..." Naruto began.

"Yes we are." Hinata answered. She gave Naruto a cautious look.

Sasori grinned a bit. He thought this might just be interesting.

---

They had continued to play for over an hour. *Stallos* regaled them with exotic stories about the Grand Bizarre of Suna where almost anything could be found and where you could haggle with the merchants. Naruto gladly told him about some of his own recent travels. As they played the other players dropped out leaving only them and the dealer at the table. Naruto had won most of the hands and had slowly reduced the number of chips in front of the red head. Naruto appreciated the good humor his opponent kept even as he lost his money.

"I need to go to the little girl's room." Hinata whispered to Naruto. He merely nodded and eyed his hand.

Seeing her leave Sasori thought he had an opportunity.

"Do you know I have been planning to do some business in Fire country? Tell me, what port would you recommend I visit to begin with?"

"Nagamo," Naruto answered off handedly as he tossed a couple chips in to open.

"Really? But Yokosuka is the largest port."

"Oh Yokosuka is a great city too, don't get me wrong. I just think Nagamo is a little more interesting."

"Have you been there anytime recently?" Stallos asked innocently as he discarded a pair of cards.

"Just a few days ago as a matter of fact."

Stallos nodded and had no trouble hiding his pleasure. "Is there any particular hotel you'd recommend?"

"The only hotel there I'm really familiar with is the, 'Flying Crane' and it's really nothing that special."

"Oh I am certain that will be just fine." He tossed in the remainder of his chips. "I call." He dropped his cards to reveal a pair of eights.

Naruto looked at him in surprise as he scooped up the pot. "You called on such a weak hand?"

Stallos got up and bowed. "Ah, but I suppose I am a poor player. Good night to you Naruto."

When Hinata returned a moment later she found Naruto as the only one at the table besides the dealer. "Did you finally scare him off?" She asked playfully.

"Yeah, but only after I got all his money. You know Hinata-chan maybe I really should become a gambler. I mean I made twenty thousand ryu in a few hours and I didn't even have anyone throw a kunai at me."

Hinata smiled and wrapped her arms around him. "Well before you decide to become a cute young male version of Lady Tsunade why don't you take me dancing first? There's a dance club not too far from here and it has been a long time since you've danced with me."

"Sounds good Hinata-chan."

---

The following morning was one of the very few times when Kakashi was the first one to be up. Naruto and Hinata were both still in their beds asleep after being out all night dancing. Kiba had been in the hotel bar trying to meet some girls and trying out various hard liquors. Kiba had already gotten into the habit of drinking a bit. In Konoha the drinking age was 18. But as with many other things the rule was different for those who wore the hitai-ite. Kakashi wasn't sure just how much Kiba had wound up drinking, but he was sure that he would regret it whenever he finally woke up. After being stuck on the boat so long Kakashi had given his team one night to relax and enjoy themselves. Tomorrow was the auction and the mission would begin in earnest. He would give them until this afternoon to rest and recover. But he'd found a dojo where they would get some practice in this afternoon.

Currently he was sitting down at a small outdoor café enjoying a light breakfast and rereading his new book. He wanted to see how Tako dealt with the twin model sisters whose carriage had just broken down. They had just started complaining about their wet clothes when Kakashi felt a powerful chakra signature and looked up to see the blonde effeminate Akatsuki member approaching his table.

"Mind if I join you, yeah?" Deidara asked.

Carefully closing and putting away his book Kakashi nodded. "Please do." He pointed to the seat across from his. "You do know that were you to attack me in public it would be a capital offense."

Deidara sat down and smiled. "Yeah, too bad, I could make your death a true work of art."

"I trust you also know that all of us are being watched." Kakashi said off handedly.

"Yeah, well unless they have every table in this place bugged we can talk for a little bit."

"What do you want to talk about?"



"Yeah, me and my partner want to let you know that you and your team need to get out of here."

Kakashi lifted an eyebrow. "Well I have to say that's the politest threat I've ever received. But I'm afraid our orders are quite clear. We will not allow the curse seal to fall into your hands or those of any one else."

Deidara laughed. "We don't want it. We Akatsuki are sort of an exclusive bunch. Having a horde of overpowered and half crazed drones isn't really our thing. It figures you Leaf nins want it."

"We **don't** want it. But we won't let it fall into anyone else's hands."

Deidara and Kakashi looked at one another for a moment. "Yeah, you really think I'm going to believe you leaf nins don't want something that will make you more powerful?"

"Not when that power comes at the cost of your sanity. Not to mention the little fact it kills ninety percent of those who get infected." Kakashi shook his head. "And you expect me to believe a known terrorist when he says his criminal organization has no interest in it?"

"Yeah, well the fact is we don't. What we do have an interest in is the health of the Kyuubi."

Kakashi sent the man a cold look backed by just a little killer intent. "His name is Naruto; don't insult him by calling him Kyuubi."

Deidara chuckled. "Yeah, whatever, the thing is we need *Naruto* to stay alive and well until we can harvest him."

Kakashi's one visible eye flattened and his killer intent ratcheted up a couple notches. "Harvest him?"

"Yeah, we're going to yank the Kyuubi right out of him, which will kill him of course." Deidara noticed the killer intent rising again. "We have plans for its chakra and the chakra of all the biju."

"What sort of plans?"

"Yeah, like I'm going to tell you." Actually like the other members of Akatsuki he did not know exactly what his leader had in mind. "But for right now at least it seems we have some common goals. Don't go to the auction tomorrow. I'm going to make it a real work of art."

---

Kakashi and his team were walking along the beach admiring the sunset and having a quiet talk.

"Niisan are you crazy? You expect us to *trust* these bastards?"

"We're not going to trust them blindly." Kakashi said as he looked over the book. "We'll make sure their intention really is to destroy the information rather than steal it. However if that is what they have in mind we will not interfere."

"Pardon me Kakashi-sensei," Hinata spoke up as she and Naruto walked hand in hand. "But what if Naruto-kun is right? How can we work with them when we know what they want to do with Naruto-kun?" her voice had an edge to it. Hearing it Naruto looked over to her and gave her hand a little squeeze.

"Hinata, I am not saying that these two aren't the enemy. All I am saying is that for the moment at least our goals are the same and we can use them in order to complete our mission successfully." They walked a bit more. "Now here is what I have in mind..."

---

The following day at noon the three groups were escorted to the grand palace of Lord Taka. In the great hall of his home Lord Taka smiled at them. No less than fifty of his ninja were on hand to provide security. He was not a fool to think there was no danger. But with so many of his ninja at hand he thought the risks to be reasonable.

"Gentlemen," he spoke in a friendly and eager tone. "I thank you for your interest in the one item I have available today. Your presence

here speaks well of both your wisdom and resources. The villages of Lightning and Mist were both also invited but declined to come. Surely your foresight will be well rewarded in the near future and provide more than adequate compensation for the monetary sacrifice that..."

"Enough!" An annoyed Sasori called out in his gravelly voice. "I detest being kept waiting. We all know the reason that we are here. Let us begin."

Seeing nods all around Lord Taka reached into a pouch and pulled out a plastic case with a single disc inside. "This gentlemen contains all the information relating to Orochimaru's curse seal. Including a method of creating a curse seal without Orochimaru's involvement. Whoever is the high bidder shall win for their village or organization a great new source of power. And the knowledge will be theirs exclusively."

"How are we to be sure of that?" Sasori demanded.

Lord Taka was hardly offended. "Gentlemen, my reputation should be all the guarantee you need. I am well aware of the value of security and privacy. Besides this disc I hold in my hand the information is kept in the computer system in this palace. It exists nowhere else. Once the final bid is accepted I shall hand over the disc and completely wipe my computer system thus ensuring the owner exclusivity."

"I think he's telling the truth." Kakashi noted.

"Yeah, me too." Deidara agreed.

"In that case can we finally begin?" Takuya asked.

"Yes," Sasori agreed. "Let us begin." He looked to his partner. "Do not keep me waiting long." His image became sand and spread out over the floor.

Kakashi looked over to his team. "Naruto."

"Right." Naruto disappeared in a puff of smoke.

---

On board their yacht Naruto looked over to his team. They had managed to sneak back unobserved while shadow clones took their place. "It's starting. I'll be right back" Without hand signs he disappeared in a golden flash.

"Captain, we'll be going now." Kakashi said calmly.

"Yes sir." The ship's captain began barking out orders and the engines began coming to life. "You do know sir, that while we're a bit faster than the gunships their cannon will have us in a range for some time and we can't out run the shells."

"Don't worry we have something in mind for that." Kakashi said.

Kiba puffed out his chest. "Right! With my Lightning Fang me and Akamaru will totally take those ships apart."

"Actually Kiba I was thinking of a certain jutsu of Naruto's."

---

"What is the meaning of this?" Lord Taka demanded. With a wave of his hand fifty ninjas closed in around them.

"I told you to accept my offer." Takuya said resignedly.

As Lord Taka watched Deidara's form changed to grey clay. "Oh yeah! Let me show all of you that art is a," too late the people in the hall realized they were in trouble. "BANG!!"

---

There was a yellow flash and Naruto appeared again wearing a huge smile.

Kakashi looked at him in surprise. "How did it go?"

"Pretty much as you expected niisan. The chest was in a vault somewhere and since I'd put a seal on it the Hiraishin took me straight to it."

They heard a huge explosion. Along with the explosion Kakashi received the memory of his shadow clone and Naruto the memories of the two clones that had been playing as Kiba and Hinata. "Well it looks like they really did want the information destroyed." Kakashi said.

"I guess," Naruto muttered. "I still don't trust them."

"Neither do I Naruto." Kakashi said. "But it would have been foolish to refuse to use such a valuable resource." They all lurched as the yacht pulled away from the dock and headed out to sea as fast as their engines could take them.

"Hey Naruto," Kiba asked. "Where's the chest?"

Smiling he pulled out a scroll and spread it on the floor. "**Release.**" In a puff of smoke the chest they'd brought with them appeared. Along with two others.

"You got all three?!" Kiba exclaimed.

"Yeah." Naruto said proudly.

"Great job Naruto. You've just done the village quite a service." Kakashi beamed.

There were a couple small booms as ahead of them two geysers of water burst.

"We have a problem." The captain called out. "One of the gunships has opened fire on us."

---

What had been a magnificent marble palace only a moment before was a smoking crater now. Circling high above in a large clay bird Deidara could hear the faint echoes of people screaming in panic.

"Yeah, come on master Sasori will you finally admit the wonder of my art?"

His blocky partner was riding just behind him. "You are a child that just likes simple momentary thrills. True art lasts forever, is a joy forever."

Deidara stuck a hand into a case filled with clay. In short order the mouth within his hand spat out five small clay birds. Deidara tossed them out and watched as they expanded and sped earthwards.

"What are you doing?" Sasori asked.

"With such a magnificent canvas before me how can I not make more art?" He thrilled to see five more marble building explode and collapse. Fresh screams filled the air. "Yeah! Now that's art!"

"You really are a child." Sasori muttered. "While looking below he noticed the scene in the harbor as nine gunships began to swarm and close in on the yacht from Fire country. "It seems we may have to intervene to save the Kyuubi."

Before Deidara could reply they saw something stir just beneath the waves.

---

The yacht turned with all its might as explosions and geysers of water seemed to surround them. All nine of the gunships were moving in to cut off any escape.

"If you're going to do something do it now!" A terrified captain cried out.

"Naruto, are you sure your jutsu can deal with this?" Kakashi asked just a bit nervously.

"Probably."

"Probably?!" Kakashi gawked at him.

Naruto shrugged as he bit down on his thumb. "Well technically I've never actually used it before." Kakashi stared at him jaw hanging open beneath his mask. "Oh come on, have faith in your future Hokage." He began to quickly run through a long series of hand signs. " **Summoning of the Kraken** ." He slammed his hand down on the deck.

---

The water in the bay suddenly grew choppy and rough as all the ships were tossed about. Then from all around eight massive tentacles began to rise up out of the ocean. They were massive, rising hundreds of feet into the air and wide enough to triple the length of any of the ships. There were screams just at the very sight. The gunships began to turn and a couple redirected their aim and fired at the massive tentacles. There was an explosion on the fleshy side of one of the arms. The flesh was torn and some blood began to rain down. Compared to the mass of the arm the wound seemed little more than a pin prick. But the water stirred and all the tentacles began to wave as if in reaction to pain.

Down they came slamming into the sea and into the gunships. With a shredding sound Naruto watched as the most powerful ships in the world were crushed like empty soda cans. A few sailors had gotten away and were in the water swimming for all they were worth. Eager not to let such tasty morsels escape the suckers on the underside latched on and pulled them down into the churning water.

Two of the gunships had avoided the first encounter and were both turning around and trying to make it to open sea. Each was grabbed by a tentacle, not to be crushed but rather hauled up out of the water.

As Naruto watched what seemed like a gigantic birds beak burst up out of the waves. From beneath this beak a monstrous body arose up out of the water. The monster's flesh was pink and they could see vast veins pulsing just beneath the skin. A single yellow eye rose above the sea. It turned and focused on Naruto and he **knew** that it would have eagerly devoured him as well.

Two tentacles took hold of each of the remaining boats and tore them roughly in half. Then the tentacles began to shake them. Out of the ruined boats came debris and bits and pieces of metal, furniture, and living men. The men howled in mortal terror as they fell into the waiting mouth beneath them. The beak opened wide and then snapped shut eagerly consuming them.

---

"Naruto-kun that's enough!" Hinata cried out. "Stop it!"

Nodding Naruto ended the jutsu.

With the Kraken's sudden disappearance the water rushed in to the now empty space and the yacht was tossed about.

---

"Yeah, now that was impressive." Deidara said.

Sasori could only nod. "It's almost a shame, I would love to hollow him out and make him a puppet."

"Yeah, well you can always keep him as a souvenir if you want. Now let's get going." The bird circled once more and then began the long journey back to the coast.

---

The trip back to their original starting point of Nagamo was quiet and uneventful.

It was near dark when they finally returned. "All right, we'll get a good night's rest and then head back home early in the morning." Kakashi



announced.

His team met the decision with happy agreement, glad to finally be off the boat and back on dry land.

---

Late that night.

Naruto was awoken by the ringing of a telephone. Half awake he groped around the night stand before finally grabbing it. "Hello?" he muttered into the receiver. "Hmmm? An ANBU messenger? A special message just for me?" He suddenly felt himself to be far more awake. "I'll be right down!"

Naruto quickly got dressed. This was certainly unusual, but he liked the idea of his godmother sending a special message for only him. *Maybe it's a special mission too dangerous for anyone but me.*

---

Down in the hotel lobby he received a note with a location only a few blocks from the hotel. Though it was past midnight he got moving with all his usual energy. Reaching the specified street corner he spotted the ANBU standing on a roof top.

He leapt up to the roof to face the man in the owl mask.

"So what's the..." he recognized the chakra signature. He suddenly leapt back and pulled out his katana. "You!"

"Too late Naruto-kun." A calm voice spoke as red eyes locked onto his blue ones.

## The supreme order

Naruto had faced the sharingan many times before while sparring with his niisan. He'd faced Itachi once before and defeated him, though with help. He had even faced the power of the mangekyo sharingan in his final battle with Sasuke. All of this had led Naruto to believe that the sharingan and the mangekyo sharingan, while certainly powerful, were not deserving of their fearsome reputations. Unfortunately, he was about to discover something he should have all ready known. As a fifth level blade master he could do things with his katana that a novice could not even imagine. That same vast gulf also existed between novice and master users of the mangekyo.

He began to understand this as he felt his body being pulled into a dark nightmarish realm and could nothing to stop it.

One moment he had been on the roof of a building in Nagamo about to fight. The next he was naked and bent over in a three foot tall iron cage.

"In the Tsukuyomi dreamscape I completely control time, space, and even all substance. Within this realm I am truly a god." Itachi's calm disembodied voice seemed to come from everywhere.

Naruto grabbed the bars and desperately tried to snap them. He could not form a rasengan or focus chakra into his hand; he couldn't even seem to feel his chakra. There was something about being in a cage that just filled him with a mad panic. He shook the bars and threw his shoulder against them all to no effect. "Let me out of here!"

"You killed my foolish little brother." The disembodied voice continued in that calm even strain. "It seems only fitting that I do the same with a member of your family."

Suddenly a woman appeared before him kneeling with bent over. She brought her head and her eyes looked into his with a quiet

strength and a love that would never fade. "Naruto-kun, I am so proud of you my son. I love you."

"Mom!" He knew this wasn't real. He told himself again and again it was nothing but a genjutsu. But the sight of his mother seemed as real to him as the iron bars he was gripping.

And before his eyes Itachi appeared standing directly behind her a sword raised above his head.

**" NO! MOM RUN!! ITACHI DON'T F#&KING TOUCH HER OR I'LL KILL YOU!!"** Naruto howled and threw his body against the cage suddenly beyond frantic.

Neither Itachi nor his mother seemed to hear him. With a smooth and ideal grace Itachi brought the blade down and severed Kushina's neck as Naruto could only watch. Her head came off as neat as you could please and the blood gushed from the neck as her body tumbled over.

Naruto howled as he felt his heart and soul being ripped from him. He felt hot tears and his throat choking. "Mooom!!" He wailed in despair.

Itachi watched and simply nodded, satisfied. "I will spend 72 hours torturing you. We have 71 hours, 59 minutes, and 59 seconds still remaining."

Suddenly his mom was alive again and kneeling before him. "Naruto-kun, I am so proud of you my son. I love you." The words were spoken in that gentle voice that had always comforted him and made him feel safe.

He tried to shut his eyes this time. "This is a damn lie! It's an illusion. It's not real!" Though his eyes were closed he heard the sickening sound of metal cutting flesh and bone. He heard a body tumble to the ground and a head bounce in the dirt. Despite his eyes being shut the memory was already burned into his mind.

"We have 71 hours, 59 minutes, and 58 seconds still remaining."

"Naruto-kun, I am so proud of you my son. I love you."

"Stop it! Please I'll do anything but stop!" His eyes were open and he saw the sword come down and cut into his mother's neck.

"We have 71 hours, 59 minutes and 57 seconds still remaining."

"Naruto-kun, I am so proud of you my son. I love you."

---

Some things in life were difficult to endure even once. When such an event repeated itself thousands of times, with each repetition seeming real it was more than even the strongest will could bear.

---

It took only a few seconds of real time and his technique was completed. Itachi watched as Naruto stiffened. His katana slipped out of a slack hand. He pitched forward without making a sound. Itachi caught him and carefully set him down on the roof. He quickly checked Naruto's pulse and breathing to make sure the Tsukuyomi had not done more than he'd wanted it to. Itachi nodded, his vital signs were strong, even if his mind was now shattered.

Itachi discarded the mask and robe that had been his disguise. He had decided not to use a henge in order to increase the odds of bringing Naruto close to him. It had worked. Gently Itachi removed the ring on Naruto's right hand and returned it to his own.

"You are truly a worthy adversary Naruto-kun. Feel no shame in the fact that you were defeated in a single move. The mere fact I was required to resort to it speaks highly of you." He picked Naruto up and with great care put him over one shoulder. "I bear you no ill will Naruto-kun, neither for my arm or for Sasuke. You have become a truly powerful ninja and I respect you. I do regret that you shall meet your end not in battle but as a mere tool at the hands of my

organization. However to deliver you is the supreme order given unto me by the Akatsuki."

With a simple gesture he and Naruto were gone.

---

A few miles outside the city Itachi met his former partner and his current one.

"I see it went well." Kabuto said with a friendly smile. He was standing in his black cloak with red clouds.

"I notice you managed to keep your arm this time." Kisame chuckled. "Hey you even got your ring back."

Itachi simply nodded, being in no mood to talk. "We need to move quickly. Once they learn his fate Konoha will surely mount a rescue attempt." He looked at Kisame in his black shirt and pants, his bandaged sword still on his back. "I require your assistance until the operation is complete. Once we have harvested the Kyuubi your debt to me shall be fully paid."

Kisame nodded. "Sure thing."

They all got moving at top speed through the trees. Itachi continued to carry Naruto.

"What do we do if his team manages to track us?" Kabuto asked in a cheerful voice.

"If that happens we will deal with them." It was all Itachi would say. They had a good many hours until dawn and covered quite a lot of ground.

---

It was eight in the morning. Hinata checked her appearance once more in the mirror. She had showered, dressed, brushed her teeth, and combed her hair. Satisfied with her appearance she grabbed her

back pack off the bed and left her hotel room. She went a couple doors down to Naruto's room. She knocked.

"Naruto-kun it's eight. Are you ready for breakfast yet?" That was the normal routine. She would grab Naruto and then Kiba. The three of them would have breakfast at the time Kakashi had told them too. Then around ten sensei would finally show up to eat. Then once he had eaten they would finally be ready to leave.

As she stood in the hall waiting for a response she began to frown. Naruto being a little late was hardly unusual. But normally he would be shouting he need to take a quick shower or was still getting dressed and needed a minute. He didn't usually sleep in unless he'd been out all night.

She knocked again, just a little more loudly. "Naruto-kun are you awake? Are you ready for breakfast?" Still there was no answer.

She frowned a bit more. Something about the silence from his room bothered her. She was sure it was nothing, but still... "**Byakugan.**" She immediately saw that his hotel room was empty. She at once checked to see if he was with Kiba or Kakashi. Kiba was dressed and ready. Kakashi sensei was still in bed. She checked the hotel lobby and café, only to find he was not there either. She expanded her field of vision and did a quick scan in a two mile radius. Unfortunately being in a big city with so many people made it difficult to spot any one specific individual.

Now starting to feel really worried she activated her radio. "Naruto-kun this is Hinata-chan, where are you?" She set her radio back to receive and waited. There was only silence. She forced herself to wait a full minute before sending out another message. "Naruto-kun if you can hear me please respond."

Kiba had heard the same message over his radio and came out of his room. "What's going on Hinata-chan?"

"Naruto-kun is missing." There was worry lacing her voice. "He's not in his room and I don't know where he is."

Seeing she was really worried he gave her a calming grin. "Relax Hinata-chan, knowing Naruto he probably woke up early and decided to do some sword training."

She considered it and slowly nodded. "Maybe, I noticed his sword and gear are gone but he left behind his back pack."

"Well there you go! I'm sure that's it."

"But why wouldn't he answer my call? Naruto would never ignore a radio call from one of us."

Kiba's confident grin faded a bit. "That's true," he admitted. He sniffed the air. "Well I'm sure he's fine, but if you want we can go track him down. He left a good strong trail."

Hinata nodded instantly. "Yes let's go find Naruto-kun."

"You want to wake sensei?"

"No, let him sleep for now."

---

The trail led them to a roof top only a few blocks from the hotel. She spotted it instantly.

"Oh kami." She whispered. She felt all the strength in her body leave her. She dropped to her knees beside the sword. "This is Naruto-kun's katana. He wouldn't leave it; he'd sooner leave an arm behind."

"Hinata," Kiba's voice was now filled with fear. "There's another scent here." She looked up at him fearfully. "It's Itachi's."

---

Kakashi was sitting up in bed reading. He'd accidentally left his radio communicator off and so had missed the frantic messages that had

been sent to him. So he was a bit surprised when his hotel door exploded into kindling. Instinctively leapt out of bed and grabbed a kunai.

Expecting to see some enemy ninja he was surprised to instead see a rather upset Hinata with her fist surrounded by chakra. "Hinata what on earth..."

"Kakashi sensei why is your radio off?" She demanded. "Naruto-kun's been kidnapped by Itachi! We have to go after him!"

"He's been what?!"

Hinata and Kiba quickly related the events and Hinata held out the katana as physical proof of their words. Kakashi ignored his embarrassment from standing in front of his team in boxers and a T shirt. He quickly got dressed and wrote out a message on some paper.

" **Summoning Technique.**" In a small puff of smoke Pakkun appeared. "Pakkun we have an emergency." Kakashi wasted no time with idle greetings. "Naruto has been kidnapped by Uchiha Itachi. My team and I will be going after him immediately, but we have no idea how many of the Akatsuki may be involved. Go to the Hokage and tell her we'll need all the back up she can spare us."

"All right got it. And good luck to you." Pakkun disappeared.

---

They had been traveling eight hours and the sun was now well above the horizon. Itachi and Kabuto entered the hidden underground base. Kisame would remain outside as he was no longer a member and so not welcomed.

Arriving in the cavernous chamber they were greeted by the astral projection of their leader.

"I see that you have succeeded. I am most pleased."



"Yes." Itachi replied as he placed Naruto down in the very center of the stone floor. He then stood there and simply looked down at the motionless form.

Kabuto observed his partner with a look of surprise. "If I didn't know any better I would think you were sad."

Itachi sent his partner an icy glance. "You do not know me. Do not make the mistake of thinking that you do."

Pein completed a very long series of hand signs. All around them an arcane statue began to rise up out of the ground, like some sort of bizarre tree. A distorted face with eight closed eyes and two hands took shape.

Pein leapt up to stand on one of the fingers. "Come it is time." All around him astral projections of various members began to appear at their appointed places. Itachi and Kabuto leapt up to their positions as well.

"Let us commence harvesting the Kyuubi. In three days we shall have added his power to our own."

---

Tsunade was asleep with her head on a pile of papers when Pakkun arrived with a puff of smoke.

"Hokage-sama!"

"I'm awake!" Tsunade suddenly sat up. "Pakkun? What are you doing here?"

The small dog leapt in to her desk and pulled out the scroll Kakashi had given him. "There's an emergency you need to read this."

Tsunade took the offered paper and did just that. The message on it was short and to the point. "Oh kami! Naruto!" She pressed the intercom button on her desk. "Shizune we have an emergency call in

Kushina, Gai, Asuma, and their teams. Also I want Captain Tenzo here as fast as possible."

"Yes Lady Tsunade." A startled Shizune answered.

"And have an emergency message sent out to Jiraiya that he is to report back to the village immediately." Tsunade let go of the intercom and looked at Pakkun. "How long ago did this happen and where?"

"It happened about eight hours ago and it was in Nagamo."

"That's three days away, damn it. Do you have any more information for me?"

"Only that Kakashi and the rest of his team are pursuing them."

Tsunade nodded grimly. "All right, get back to Kakashi and I want to be informed the moment you learn more."

"Right." Pakkun disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Tsunade looked out her office window. *I am not going to lose you Naruto. Not like I lost Dan and Nawaki. I'll save you no matter what my godson.*

# First Strike

"Do you have any idea what this is about?" Asuma asked quietly.

"Not a clue." Kushina stated. "But when you're ordered to meet the Hokage immediately, it's never for good news." She looked around the reception area. "And judging by how many Jonin and Chunin we have here I'm expecting the worst."

"Yosh, whatever it is we shall master it with the fires of our youth."

Kushina shook her head not really wanting to argue with Guy. *Nothing* could get that man down. The three senseis had gathered together away from their teams to talk for a bit. But unfortunately none of them knew anything. Kushina looked at who had been summoned.

Rock Lee and his teammate Tenten were conversing. Despite both being Chunin they still worked together with Guy. Tenten was wearing more formal clothing than she once had with a large scroll other back. She and Neji had become very close according to Hinata. Lee was still a clone of his sensei, even more so now that he wore a Chunin vest. He still spouted about, 'fires of youth' and all that and he was still as determined as ever to be a great ninja even without chakra. He was however just a bit more serious and a bit more grown up than he had been. Sakura's death had hit him hard; it had taken him about a year to regain his smile. But he would never again be quite the same.

Shikamaru was leaning against a wall as he listened to Ino talk and as Chouji had some chips. Shikamaru had become Jonin about six months ago and though Yoshino was technically clan head he seemed to bear most of the burden. Ino and Chouji were both Chunin, while Chouji had the added pressure of also being clan head. The three of them were no longer an active team, though they did still train and go out together at times. If team ten was being

reassembled that was likely a bad sign. It meant a difficult mission was lying ahead and their special abilities might be called on.

There was also a group of four ANBU standing a bit separately. She recognized their leader as Captain Tenzo. Naruto still called him Yamato, or even sometimes Yamato-sensei. Was the Hokage planning on using a four man ANBU squad as well?

Finally she looked to her own team. Their team dynamic had always been a bit off. Having two girls in love with the same guy tended to do that. But things had gotten worse recently with Haku and Gabrella barely able to communicate with each other. She had tried to find out the problem but her efforts had met with failure.

---

Three days ago.

Panting and covered in sweat he rolled off of her. She smiled over at him as they relaxed in the bed. Both of them satisfied, both of them spent. She hated having to sneak off to hotels disguised with henges. But that was still better than having to explain to her father or to sensei what they were doing. She and Haku had been lovers for awhile now and she was not willing to risk these short moments of raw joy. They would sneak off separately and rendezvous at their hotel for an hour or two. That was all they dared to spend like this. What she really wanted was to spend the night with him. The sex was amazing and ferocious, Haku had been shy at first but after awhile he'd become a real tiger much to her surprise and pleasure. But she loved him, not just physically but with her whole heart. She wanted to drift off to sleep with his arms wrapped around her. But that of course was impossible.

"Gabrella?" Haku looked over to her. The smile of just a moment ago gone and replaced by a serious look. "What are we going to do?"

She gently caressed his face. "Do we have to talk about this right now?"

"We've been avoiding it for a long time but the problem is not going to go away. Gabrella I love you and I want you to marry me."

She let her hand fall away. "I love you too Haku and nothing would make me happier." He waited as she paused, knowing what was coming. "But would you be willing to join my clan?"

He sighed. "I have already told you I intend to found my own clan."

"And I have told you I intend to change my clan for the better one day. I can only do that as clan head. As much as I love you, for a ninja some times duty must come before all else even love." She looked at him desperately. "Haku, is it really so important for you to found a new clan? Momichi isn't even your original clan name is it?"

Haku shook his head. "I never knew what my mother's maiden name was. I have no idea what clan I am descended from."

"Then Haku why not just become an Uchiha?"

He hesitated before giving her his answer. "Because I do not want my children born into that clan."

She suddenly sat up. "What the hell do you mean?" She often complained about the problems in her clan, but didn't appreciate hearing criticism from someone outside the family. Even if it was from him. "What's wrong with being Uchiha?"

He sat up as well. "Gabrella I know you would be a wonderful mother, and would love and care for our children. But I know how much you have suffered because of your clan's feelings towards its kekkei genkai. I have suffered because of how others viewed my kekkei genkai. I do not want my children to endure that as well. I do not want them born into a clan that will only judge them by their blood line limit. I want my clan to be like the Namikaze, where all family members are loved and accepted regardless of blood or ability."

"You've never said that before."

"I didn't want to tell you."

"But Haku it won't be like that for our children! I'm going to change the Uchiha and the way we deal with the sharingan. Our children won't go through what I did."

"You can't guarantee that Gabrella." Haku spoke quietly and earnestly. "Even if you can change the hearts of your clan members what if you should be killed one day? It is a possibility we have to consider. You lost your mother, I lost both parents, Naruto lost his father, and Hinata lost her mother. I won't put my children in a clan where they may end up suffering just because of what is in their blood. I will not join the Uchiha clan."

"Well I won't abandon my clan. So where the hell does that leave us?"

---

The doors to the Hokage's office opened and out came a grim looking Tsunade followed by an equally worried looking Shizune.

"We are badly pressed for time so I am going to just announce what's going on." She faced Kushina. "About eight hours ago Naruto was captured in the city of Nagamo by Uchiha Itachi."

Kushina felt her heart turn to lead and fall into her belly. "Naruto's been captured?!" Her voice was only one among many that cried out upon hearing the news.

Tsunade held up her hands and it took a moment for everyone to settle down so she could continue. "All right, here is what we know. Naruto has been captured and taken somewhere. According to information given to us by Kisame it is almost one hundred percent certain he will be brought to an Akatsuki base to have the Kyuubi taken out of him. At this moment Kakashi and the rest of his team

are tracking him. The moment they learn his location Kakashi will send a summons to me to tell me exactly where he is."

"We're going to get him back!" Kushina shouted.

"Of course we are!" Tsunade agreed. "That is why all of you are here. I would like to bring every ninja in the village with us, but not even for Naruto can I risk doing that. This is the largest and best force that I can safely spare. I've also sent for Jiraiya but he is out of the village right now and we can't afford to wait. According to Kisame it takes three days to remove a demon from its host. We have that much time to save him. I'm leading all of you on an S plus rank mission to save the life of Namikaze Naruto."

"Lady Tsunade you cannot do that!" Shizune protested. "Even if it is Naruto you can't simply leave to go on a mission."

Tsunade shook her head. "I can and I will. The village will survive fine without me for a short time. You can handle things while I'm gone. If something were to happen to Naruto because I wasn't there I would never forgive myself." She looked at everyone. "Get any supplies you need and make sure you have plenty of soldier pills. We'll meet at the gates in twenty minutes."

She went over to Kushina and embraced her. "We're getting him back don't doubt it for a second." Tsunade said.

Kushina nodded. She was terrified. This was her worst nightmare come to life. "I know we will. I am not losing my son no matter what."

---

"Hinata! Stay in formation! Given who we're up against we can't afford to get sloppy!" Kakashi called out. They were flying through the trees with Kiba and Akamaru leading the way. Despite needing to follow Kiba's lead Hinata was starting to push ahead of him.

"But we have to hurry!" She yelled back. "We have to save him!" The terror in her voice was plain.

"We will Hinata." Kakashi assured her. "We're going to save him. But we can't do it if we're spread all over the forest. Stay in tight with us, you will get your chance soon enough believe me. But remember we will be facing Akatsuki. If you're not focused and sharp you *will* die. Do keep that in mind Hinata."

"I understand sensei." She slowed down just a tad to stay in formation. She knew Kakashi was right of course. But her every instinct demanded she get to Naruto as fast as her body would take her. *Hold on Naruto-kun, we're coming to save you.*

---

Pein's astral projection seemed to sigh. "We have company approaching. They need to be dealt with. How many of our servants are available?"

"Only two." Sasori replied. "That was all that was available."

Pein nodded. "Itachi, you and your partner deal with them. I will require you to prevent any interruption."

"I understand." Itachi replied calmly.

---

Kiba took a deep breath. "We've got company coming."

"Who?" Kakashi called out.

"One of the scents is Kisame's, the other two I don't recognize."

Kakashi signaled a halt. They each landed on a separate tree branch. "Hinata what do you see?"

Nodding she activated her blood line. " **Byakugan.**" She looked off about a mile and a half ahead of them. "Something strange is going on. I see Kisame and two others who look like Itachi and Kabuto, but their images are false."



Kiba nodded. "Yeah whatever they look like the ones ahead of us are **not** Itachi and Kabuto."

"That doesn't mean this is going to be easy. Kisame is an S-rank missing nin and the abilities of these other two may be unknown but we have to assume they're extremely dangerous. We'll have to go at them with our full strength. And since that's the case..." He lifted his hitai-ite to reveal his sharingan. "All right, let's go face them."

---

In an open clearing Itachi, Kisame, and Kabuto waited. Kakashi, Hinata, and Kiba riding on Akamaru landed at the other end of the clearing.

Itachi nodded to them in a polite manner. "That you would risk facing us to try and retrieve Naruto-kun speaks well of your courage, if not your sense of survival. Leave here and do not return, this will be your only warning."

"Itachi, where is Naruto? What have you done with him?" Kakashi asked as Hinata and Kiba carefully got some space to either side.

Itachi nodded and both Kabuto and Kisame took a few steps from him. "He is nearby meeting his destiny. Rescue is impossible and would only lead to your own deaths."

"We'll never abandon Naruto-kun!" Hinata spat out venomously.

"Very well." Itachi began casting a jutsu as both Kisame and Kabuto leapt forward. " **Grand Fireball Technique.**" A huge boulder of concentrated flame came at Kakashi who leapt aside to dodge it.

---

A little ways off Kabuto confronted Hinata. As he took out a kunai he offered her a friendly smile. "It's been a long time hasn't it Hinata? I haven't seen you since the start of the Chunin exams. If I may say so you have grown into a beautiful young woman."

With her byakugan already active she sent him a cold look. "Do you really think your compliments mean anything to me?"

"Now, now, no need to be hostile. You don't have to die here you know. Walk away and you can live a nice long life. If you insist on pushing this you're going to die here today."

She dropped into a jyuken fighting stance. "I love Naruto more than my own life. For him I would gladly die or kill."

Kabuto shook his head. "Don't you have any dreams? If you die here your dreams will die with you."

Hinata sent him a chill smile. "Being with Naruto-kun is my dream. If I lose him then there is nothing left for me."

"Well I see there's no talking to you." Kabuto rushed forward to attack her.

---

Kisame took Samehada off his back and allowed the bandages to fall away. "I'm going to shave you to the bone kid and your little dog too."

Akamaru growled. "Shut up," Kiba shouted. He leapt off of Akamaru's back. "I know just how dangerous you are and Akamaru tells me you have huge chakra reserves so I won't fool around with you. Let me show you an original jutsu my sensei helped me create." He launched himself into the air and began to spin. " **Lightning Fang.**"

Kisame heard a chirping of birds as the spiral coming at him suddenly lit up. "Not good." He leapt away but Kiba seemed locked in on his scent and continued to close. Kisame got his sword up and used it to block. Kiba's jutsu struck him full force and sent him flying even as he tried to hold his ground. To Kisame astonishment as he tried to block the raw force of this attack he heard a loud crack. His

beady little eyes grew as he saw Samehada begin to break underneath its force.

---

Itachi easily dodged the shuriken thrown at him. "It is a shame that it comes to this Kakashi. Given all our years together in the ANBU you are of the few people I truly respect. Were I a different sort of man I might consider you a friend."

Kakashi nodded. "I respect your skills Itachi, but nothing else. As for friendship I would never be friends with a traitor or someone who would kill his own father. You are a disgrace to both your village and clan."

Itachi frowned. "Do not speak to me of my clan. They are fools who do not understand what it means to be truly great."

"And I suppose you do?" Kakashi mocked. "In my life I have known only **one** Uchiha I would call great. And compared to Obito, you're nothing."

Itachi shook his head. "Such stupid sentimentality. Honestly Kakashi after all your years in the black ops I would have expected better from you."

"Well I have learned something Itachi. After Sasuke's little rampage Riyuki was called to account and forced to reveal information about the mangekyo sharingan. Thanks to that information and the pain I feel for Obito's death I have developed my own version of it."

Itachi stared at him. "I do not believe you. Only an Uchiha could ever develop a mangekyo."

Beneath his mask Kakashi smiled. "Spoken like any other member of the Uchiha clan. Maybe you're not so different from them after all."

Itachi felt the sting of those words. "Very well Kakashi let us put your words to the test." With that he activated his mangekyo. He swiftly

drew Kakashi into the colorless world of his own creation.

Kakashi was bound to a cross as Itachi stood before him with a sword. "Here in the Tsukuyomi dreamscape I completely control time, space, and even all substance. Within this realm I am truly a god." With no further notice he drove his sword into Kakashi's guts. "I will spend 72 hours torturing you. We have 71 hours, 59 minutes, and 59 seconds still remaining." To Itachi's surprise though Kakashi did not scream or speak a word. "Ah, now I see, clever."

In the real world Kakashi's shadow clone disappeared in a puff of smoke.

---

Kabuto had struck her twice with his chakra scalpel. The hits were non lethal but they slowed her down some. "You haven't managed to hit me once with your gentle fist. I was expecting better from you."

Hinata grinned. "I was being sloppy on purpose to draw you in. Now you are in range of my eight trigrams." She snapped down again into the jyuken stance. " **Gentle Fist: Eight Trigrams Sixty Four Palms.**" With that she launched her clan's ultimate fighting move with a speed and power that Kabuto could not hope to match. Not only did every strike shut down one of his chakra points but she had an added touch all her own. She focused just a tiny bit of chakra into the end of her fingers. The result was that along with cutting off his chakra flow she also delivered a physical beating. Making her, 'gentle' fist rather hard. Her sixty fourth and final strike sent him flying into a tree. She now stood over a beaten enemy who could no longer use chakra.

"It's over," she declared. "Now you're going to tell me exactly where Naruto is and how we can save him."

Kabuto smiled and quickly tossed a pill down his throat. He gave her a respectful nod. "This fight is over; I look forward to the next one." Almost as soon as he'd said that his body began to spasm and shake.

Her byakugan showed her his heart had stopped. She hurried to his side to try and revive him but the poison was too effective. With the poor man's death his true identity was revealed. He was just a stranger looking up at her with dead eyes. Whether the man had served willingly or been controlled she would never know. She gently closed his eyes and got moving to help her teammates.

---

" **Water Dragon Missile.**" A huge column of water rose out of a nearby pond and struck Kiba sending him flying. "You broke my sword! I'll kill you for that! I'm going to tear you apart and feed your arms and legs to my sharks while you watch!"

Kiba caught his breath and he was slammed into a tree. "Hey, it's just a sword. Would it help if I promised to buy you a new one?" Her heard Kisame scream in rage. "I guess not." Akamaru was at his side as he cast a jutsu. " **Hidden Mist Technique.**"

Kisame continued moving towards Kiba's general direction. The only thought in his head that he would kill the wretched boy for what he had done. He was still focusing on how exactly he would tear him apart when he ran into a gigantic two headed dog. To his horror the huge dog did the most terrible thing imaginable. He lifted a hind leg and sent a stream of burning urine down on him.

Kisame screamed as the urine burned like acid and he was forced to shut his eyes. The huge dog began to spin and was able to hit him full force and drive him into the earth.

---

From his hiding spot Kakashi activated his mangekyo and used its full power. Directly behind the motionless Itachi the air seemed to turn black as a portal to another dimension opened. Before Itachi could even exit the effects of his own jutsu he was pulled into the other dimension. The only sign of him left behind was a single sandal.

---

Regrouping Kakashi was pleased to see a beaten and unconscious Kisame tied up and on Akamaru's back. Kakashi was glad to hear that both his teammates were relatively unhurt. He however was feeling the strain of having used the mangekyo. Hinata was examining him with a worried look.

"Will I live?" Kakashi teased.

"Of course you will!" Hinata said.

"I was kidding Hinata." Kakashi apologized.

"Kakashi-sensei this is no time for jokes! You're suffering from chakra exhaustion. To be honest I'm amazed you can still stand. My guess is you'll need at least a couple weeks rest to recover." She looked very worried. "There is no way you can fight anymore."

Kakashi nodded sheepishly. "I shouldn't have used it, especially not when it wasn't the real Itachi. But I didn't think it would wipe me out like this." He let out a sigh. "We'll have to retreat for now and wait for reinforcement from Konoha."

"No!" Hinata said. "Kakashi-sensei you rest here. Kiba-kun and I will go ahead with the rescue."

"No you will not!" Kakashi said sharply. "Hinata with me incapacitated this team is no longer strong enough to have any chance of rescuing Naruto. Especially not since they obviously know we're here. The **real** Itachi and Kabuto are still out there waiting, not to mention however many more Akatsuki. Pushing forward would only lead to your deaths."

"So you want us to do nothing and let them just kill Naruto-kun?" She demanded.

"Hinata, I have read up on all the files concerning Akatsuki. The ceremony to remove the Kyuubi will take three full days. We have that much time to save him. Within that time the reinforcements from

Konoha will be here and we will fight alongside them. Right now our course of action is to withdraw and then get all the information we can from Kisame before we eliminate him."

"Eliminate him?" Hinata asked.

Kakashi nodded firmly. "He has a kill on sight order signed by the Hokage. Besides which with me incapacitated it would be far too dangerous to try and keep him prisoner. We will get all the information we can from him before we carry out the order."

Hinata wanted to argue but didn't. If it helped save Naruto she was ready to do anything. She looked off to the west, the direction they'd, been heading. *Please hold Naruto-kun, hold on just a little bit longer.*

---

"That was a most interesting encounter." Itachi said as both he and Kabuto stood. "Even though their opponents had only 30 percent of our chakra they did quite well. Not to mention that they succeeded in capturing Kisame."

"Speaking of your blue skin pal what do you want to do about him?" Kabuto asked.

"Nothing," Itachi replied simply.

Kabuto looked surprised. "You're going to abandon him? I thought he was a friend of yours."

"I told you before that you did not know me. I have no friends; they are nothing but a detriment. While it is true I did somewhat enjoy Kisame's company I rescued him previously for my own reasons. Likewise, I abandon him now for my own reasons. Let us return to the ceremony."

With that the two of them headed back to base, their mission accomplished.

## Nearly done

She couldn't sleep. She looked at her watch again. A whole two minutes had passed. It had been two full days since Naruto had been captured. Now it was only a question of hours. Kisame had given them valuable information on what was going on and on the layout of the Akatsuki base. After which Kakashi had dispatched him quickly and cleanly. Pakkun had then gone out to confirm the location of the base. With that done Kakashi had written up a report with everything they knew and sent Pakkun to the Hokage. Now they had to wait. She checked her watch again, two more minutes had passed.

"Hinata-chan you should be resting." A worried Kiba spoke. Beneath him Akamaru whimpered in concern.

"I can't sleep." She said simply.

Kiba was facing an odd role reversal. Usually he was the impetuous one and Hinata was the voice of reason. But she had been the one wanting to go out alone if necessary while he'd had to convince her the best chance was to wait. "It won't be long now. They'll be here before dawn and then we'll all go kick some ass and save him." He chuckled. "Then you can call him a baka for letting himself get captured in the first place."

"I won't yell at him," she said quietly. "I'm just going to hold him and never ever let him go again."

He could see how depressed she was. She'd been this way since they'd arrived at this little village about ten miles from where they'd fought. He decided to try and change the subject. "How is sensei doing?"

"I checked on him about an hour ago. He's resting comfortably. There's really nothing I can do about chakra exhaustion, he just



needs time to recover." She sighed. "He'll have to stay here when we go."

Kiba nodded. They had already talked about this. "I'll summon his nin dogs and they'll protect him while we're gone." She just nodded. "Hinata-chan he's going to be all right. You'll see, by this time tomorrow. He'll probably be complaining that he could have escaped on his own."

"I know he's all right." He **had** to be. She refused to acknowledge any other possibility. "We'll save him and everything will be just fine."

She looked at her watch and prayed for this horrible wait to end.

---

Even using soldier pills the body still needed *some* rest. The Hokage had called for a four hour halt to give everyone a chance to rest and eat. Having received the exact location of the hidden base from Kakashi they would be there before dawn. Then they would show the Akatsuki what hell was. And they would get her boy back.

"You should be resting." A familiar voice called to her.

"So should you Tsunade." Kushina didn't bother to turn around. She kept her eyes on the southern horizon.

"Well I have to make sure everything and everyone is all right before I can rest." Tsunade said. "What's your excuse?" She teased.

"That I'm his mother and I can't stop thinking about what my poor baby is suffering right now."

An uncomfortable silence fell between them for a moment.

"He's going to be all right you know." Tsunade said gently. "Naruto is strong, he'll be fine."

"I know." Kushina answered and stared hard out into the darkened landscape.

---

There was no pain. He just seemed to exist. There was just light. He looked down at his hands. *Whose hands are these? Oh that's right, they're mine aren't they?*

As he watched scenes from his life began to play out before him.

A little three or four year old Naruto fell and began to cry. His mother picked him up and consoled him. She began to rock him back and forth in her arms and soon he was smiling, the tears forgotten.

A slightly older Naruto was playing with an equally young and innocent Hinata.

There he was lying on the floor and listening as his niisan told him a story about his dad.

His godmother and his aunt Shizune were smothering him with kisses.

Pervy granddad stood there proudly as Naruto signed the frog summoning contract.

He was laughing as Shikamaru, Chouji, and Kiba all chased after Gamakichi again.

He thanked Ino for bringing all those beautiful flowers to him in his hospital room and for cheering him up.

He laughed as Lee jumped about excitedly after finally finishing the full ten hour work out.

Haku reached out and took his hand becoming a friend.

He saw a happy Alysa asking to braid his hair.

He sat in a row boat and listened to stories as he and his granduncle fished.

*I was loved and needed by a lot of people. I was blessed. It really was a good life. I don't want to leave them.*

He felt a hand on his shoulder. "I am very proud of you my son." He looked to see a face that was familiar only from pictures and the monument.

"Dad? Is it really you?"

He gave him a wide smile. "Real enough son."

Naruto reached out and hugged him and found that his arms could really touch him. "Dad I missed you!" Naruto could feel his father's arms drape around him comfortingly.

"I missed you too son. I love you Naruto and I hope you can forgive me for what I did to you."

"I love you too dad." Naruto choked the words out. "And of course I forgive you. You were the Hokage; it was your duty to protect Konoha. I know why you chose me and I understand it."

"I never wanted to leave you son, or your mother. I loved you both more than anything in the world. I am so sorry that you had to suffer for what I did. I wanted them to see you as a hero."

"I know that dad." He looked up at his father questioningly. "Have I died? Is this the afterlife?"

"No son, this is a place between life and death."

"Am I about to die then?" He frowned. "I don't want to leave the people I love, especially mom and Hinata-chan."

"I know son, but it is not your choice. I cannot see what is going to happen. You may live or you may die. If you pass on son I will be

there to guide you along the path. If you live there is something very important you must know."

"What?"

"A secret, listen closely as I tell it to you and burn the words into your mind or they will be lost."

Naruto listened carefully to his father's words and did his best to sear them into memory.

---

Finally! Hinata saw them coming in the predawn. She, Kiba, and Akamaru were at the rendezvous point. As they stood there the reinforcements they had been waiting for had finally arrived.

"Hinata! Kiba! Are you both ready to lead us to the base?" Tsunade was wasting no time. She and everyone with her had rested for a grand total of eight hours in the last three days. But thanks to the soldier pills they all had plenty energy for what lay ahead.

Kiba nodded. "We can take you straight there."

Tsunade frowned. "Since only the two of you are here I guess Kakashi really is incapacitated."

"I am very sorry Tsunade-sensei." Hinata spoke up. "He is suffering from chakra exhaustion and there was nothing I could do."

"I know, I suppose I was just hoping for a miracle. All right," she turned to everyone in her group. "You all know what we're up against and what is at stake. Fight to the full limit of your abilities and be ready to kill. Anything less and you won't survive. Now let's get Naruto!"

---

The leader of the Akatsuki looked down on the suspended form of the Kyuubi's container. Like molasses the chakra slowly oozed out of

the jinchuuriki's mouth and eyes and was absorbed into the statue. The astral form frowned with displeasure.

"It seems we are to be interrupted yet again, and this time by a larger force. It is fortunate that Sasori and Deidara are also present now. Sasori, Deidara, Itachi, and Kabuto as you are the only ones physically in attendance you shall have to deal with them. You need only delay them for a short time we are nearly done here."

---

" **Byakugan.**" They were within two miles of the enemy base so Hinata was using her blood line to take a look. She and Kiba had not been able to get this close before.

"What do you see?" A worried Kushina asked.

"I see four ninjas waiting outside the base. I recognize them from our mission to Torikae. We have Itachi, Kabuto, Sasori, and Deidara. I don't know Sasori's powers but Deidara can make explosives from clay. He can make them fly with great speed and accuracy and can make clay models large enough for him to fly on as well." Hinata said.

"Just how powerful are his explosives?" Tsunade asked.

"I saw him destroy whole buildings." Hinata said. Kiba nodded in vigorous support.

"Can you see Naruto?" Tsunade asked.

She hesitated. "Yes, but not clearly. He's within the base in a lower level. There's some weird statue there. He... he's being drained of his chakra." She looked frightened. "I can't be sure but I don't think he has much time left."

"Then I guess we'll just have to do this fast and hard." Tsunade grimaced.

---

"They are coming straight at us with no attempt at diversion or surprise." Itachi said calmly.

"They are very brave." Kabuto said.

"They are very stupid." Sasori commented gruffly as he pulled out a scroll.

Deidara laughed as he created a clay bird large enough to ride on. "Yeah, maybe they're just brave and stupid." He leapt on.

"No," Itachi stated. "They are desperate and know they have little time left."

"Yeah, well it's fine with me!" He lifted into the air. "I'll show them all that my art is a real bang!"

"Just remember not to blow us up along with them." Sasori called out. Deidara's only reply was a happy laugh. Sasori muttered something about being a child.

Kabuto smiled and looked to his stoic partner. "You worried at all?"

"No, this should be quite an interesting fight."

---

As they approached the base they all saw Deidara dive down at them. Out of his hands fell half a dozen miniature clay birds. With a poof they became life size and sped downwards.

"Look out!" Hinata screamed. "They're explosives!"

The leaf nins all dodged out of the way as six explosions detonated around them. None of them were killed or even hurt. But an attack that had begun with a minimum of preparation was thrown into complete chaos as they were forced apart into groups.

---

"Bah! This is going to be too easy. Like lambs to the slaughter." He activated his scroll and a hundred puppets suddenly came into existence. "I hope some of them will at least make interesting additions to my collection."

"Have a care Sasori; some of them might surprise you." Itachi flickered away. He knew exactly who he wanted to fight.

---

"We're fighting puppets? Man this is troublesome!" Shikamaru was forced to dodge the large scythe of a puppet made to look like a reaper. "My shadow jutsus don't work on puppets."

Ino was desperately throwing kunai to no effect. "Same for my mind and medical jutsus."

" **Body Expansion Technique.**" Chouji's form became thirty feet tall. Pulling out a metal cudgel he smashed the, 'reaper' puppet to kindling. "Well my muscle works fine."

Asuma focused his chakra into his trench knives and took another puppet apart. "Shikamaru and Ino stay close to me and Chouji until we've dealt with these puppets."

Ino hated feeling useless. She looked up and smiled. "Shikamaru, take care of my body."

"What?"

Ino brought her fingers together into a square in front of her face. "**Mind Transfer Technique.**"

---

Tsunade brought her fist into a puppet and smashed it as she kept running forward. "Kabuto you traitor!"

Kabuto smiled even as he leapt back. Unlike some others his ego was not stronger than his intelligence. He had no desire to face

Tsunade in an open fight. "Hello Tsunade-sensei, nice to see you again."

"Don't call me that you traitor!"

Kabuto chuckled. "Actually I don't consider myself a traitor at all. I was always loyal, just not to you or Konoha."

"Come here!" She smashed the ground with a kick forcing Kabuto to leap. She leaped after him determined to get some pay back for his crimes.

---

"Yosh! Now this is truly a work out! Fighting these puppets is much better than using simple training posts!" Guy had already opened the first gate and had given himself enough raw power to break the puppets that got near to him.

"There's a difference sensei!" Tenten called out. "Training posts aren't trying to kill you!" Though she preferred to use thrown weapons she could also fight effectively with a sword as she was doing now.

"That is what is making this such an excellent workout! When we return to Konoha I will see about purchasing some puppets for our regular training sessions!" Guy spoke enthusiastically as he continued to smash the things with his fists and feet. Guy was suddenly forced to dodge as a huge metal tail tried to skewer him.

"You are beginning to annoy me." The blocky Sasori called out.

Guy sent his opponent a dazzling smile and a thumbs up. "Yosh, those who lack the fires of youth often feel that way."

"Along with most people." Tenten muttered to herself.

Sasori was suddenly surrounded by a green whirlwind. "What is this?"



"Guy sensei!" Lee called out. "I will deal with our enemy!" Out of the whirlwind Lee delivered a kick with enough power to send even the heavy and bulky puppet body high into the air. Lee then launched himself. Imagining himself to be no more than the shadow of a leaf he took position behind Sasori and wrapped his bandages around him. " **Primary Lotus.**" With terrifying speed and power Sasori was driven down into the hard earth.

---

" **Rotation.**" Hinata spun forcing chakra out as a shield and sending a number of poisoned kunai and blades flying away. She leapt out and readied to fight some more. She was very glad that Tsunade had taught her how to concentrate chakra in her fists. Otherwise her gentle fist would have been useless.

Kiba and Akamaru were at her side panting. "There are a whole lot of these damn puppets!" Kiba complained.

"It doesn't matter how many there are! I would fight a million of them if I had to." She spotted something. "Dodge!" She and Kiba leapt away just in time to avoid an explosion from a clay bird.

---

Deidara laughed enjoying himself. He looked down at the scene of battle. "Yeah, such complete and total chaos. Now that is good art!" His hands were chewing clay as he wanted to make more art when his body suddenly stiffened.

Deidara came out of it and spoke in a slightly more girlish voice. (Which was really saying something.) "All right! Mind transfer was a success. Now I just need to... eek!!"

Looking down from the back of the clay bird Ino suddenly learned something about herself that she had never suspected. She was afraid of heights. She quickly went from standing to lying on her stomach clutching around the neck of her bird.

---

"What is that troublesome girl doing?" Shikamaru asked. Deidara had stopped circling over head and was now flying somewhat erratically away.

"She just might be having trouble controlling his ability." Asuma pointed out as he continued to fight. "If she has taken one of the Akatsuki out of the fight then she has done her job."

"Protect her body Shikamaru!" Chouji said, worry obvious in his voice as he looked down on his unconscious girlfriend. "Sensei and I will cover you!"

---

Haku tried desperately to stay by Kushina-sama's side but a pair of puppets cut him off. Senbons were useless against them. They sent some kunai flying towards him. He blocked them by raising an eight foot wall of ice in front of him. In the past few years he had worked hard and greatly expanded the power of his kekkei genkai.

Tayuya landed by his side playing her flute. Around them her three Doki moved and blocked the attacks of other puppets while smashing one that got too close.

"We have to get to Kushina-sama." Haku called to her.

Tayuya nodded as she continued to play her flute and maintain control of her Doki as some more puppets pressed the attack.

For the moment they could only watch.

---

"You have my personal sympathies Kushina. I truly regret the fate that was assigned to Naruto-kun."

Seeing Itachi and hearing those words filled her with an absolutely murderous rage. "You bastard! How dare you say that to me?!" With her katana she went after him. "I'm going to kill you!"

Coming straight at him in a blind rage Itachi had no trouble at all catching her line of sight and drawing her into Tsukuyomi.

Kushina suddenly found herself standing on an endless colorless plain. "What is this? A genjutsu?" She brought her palms together. "Kai!" Her attempt to dispel had no effect.

"Here in the Tsukuyomi dreamscape I completely control time, space, and even all substance. Within this realm I am truly a god." A disembodied ethereal voice seemed to speak from everywhere and nowhere.

"Damn you Itachi show yourself." Kushina growled.

"I know that you do not believe me. However the fact is that I deeply respect Naruto-kun. If it had been my choice I would have given him the chance to face me alone in battle. He could have died a swift and honorable death at my hands. A death worthy of a great shinobi. Unfortunately, my loyalty is to Akatsuki and it is the will of my organization that he meet a different end."

"Why are you telling me this? Do you think it will make any difference to me? Do you think it will make me want to kill you any less?" Kushina demanded.

"No, I simply wanted to tell you the truth and offer you my condolences. I also wanted to give you the chance to mourn your loss." At her feet the lifeless body of her son suddenly came into being. "I shall allow you to mourn him for 72 hours."

"Itachi you bastard." She whispered. "This isn't real. I refuse to believe this is real! My son is alive and well and I am going to see him again." She looked about. Itachi was nowhere to be seen. "Show yourself you coward!" She screamed.

There was no answer. Only silence. She looked down at the unmoving body of her son. She turned away. "This is an illusion and I won't believe no matter how long I am here."

---

Gabrella watched her beloved sensei freeze and understood immediately what had happened. "Itachi!" With her own sharingan active she came at him. " **Spitfire Technique.**"

Itachi dodged away from the stream of fire effortlessly. "Hello little cousin, it is nice to see you again. Congratulations on replacing my foolish little brother as clan heir."

"Itachi you have no idea how much it shames me to have to admit that you are family."

"Ah Gabrella, have you listened to everyone's opinion of me? I had hoped you might be strong enough to think for yourself."

She looked at him in shock. "Think for myself? What do you think I wouldn't hate you if it weren't for others? You killed your own father, you poisoned Sasuke somehow, and you betrayed everyone who trusted you!" She readied her sword. "Trust me cousin, I don't need any help to hate you."

Kushina suddenly fell to one knee.

Gabrella looked over to her. "Sensei are you all right?"

Panting Kushina lifted her head. Though tears were flowing she focused on Itachi who could feel her killer intent rising and rising.

"Your mind was not broken. I am truly impressed Kushina. I showed Naruto an image of me killing you over and over again for 72 hours and it completely destroyed him. Obviously your attachment to him is not as strong as his to you."

Kushina slowly got back up to her feet and readied her sword. "What could a heartless monster like you ever know about the love a mother has for her child? For what you did to me and for what you did to him I **will** kill you now." She went forward determined to end his life once and for all.

---

As the desperate battle raged outside within the base all was quiet and calm. Pein simply nodded as the final bit of the chakra was withdrawn from the jinchuuriki. With the process at last complete the empty husk was allowed to fall to the stone floor. The body was now but an empty and discarded container.

"We are done now." Pein informed them.

## My choice

With her byakugan active she saw it. She saw Naruto's body being dropped to the floor, discarded. Saw that Naruto no longer had chakra or a heartbeat or life.

"No," she whispered. "Oh kami, no." Her hands dropped to her sides and her shoulders slumped as all will to fight, or even move, left her. A puppet with a spiked club for an arm came at her. She made no effort to try and escape it.

"Hinata!" Kiba threw his twisting form into the puppet. His lightning fang tore it apart before it could reach her. As soon as that was done he landed by her side. "Hinata what's wrong with you? We're in the middle of a battle! You can't lose focus here."

She barely heard him as she fell to her knees and began to sob. It didn't matter now, nothing mattered. "Naruto-kun." She cried out as her heart broke.

---

Itachi heard his leader's command within his mind. "It seems the extraction is now complete. I have no reason to continue this battle."

"What do you mean?" Kushina asked furiously.

"The Kyuubi has been extracted and Naruto is now dead. Again, you have my condolences."

"I don't believe you, you damn liar."

"You will see for yourself soon enough." With a hand sign he was gone.

Kushina was left there, still furious and with out a target for her rage. "I don't believe him." She muttered angrily.

"Sensei?" Gabrella asked.

Kushina looked around for the nearest enemy, but to her great surprise the fighting seemed to be over. Akatsuki's sudden withdrawal from such a pitched battle did not please her. It actually scared the hell out of her. She looked over to her student. "Come on, we need to find Tsunade so we can head into the base." *I don't believe Itachi. I don't.*

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A hatch popped open and out of the now ruined puppet a red haired, 'boy' climbed out. He sent Guy and especially Lee a hateful glare. "You've ruined my second favorite puppet!" He stopped for an instant as though listening for something. "And it seems I will not even be able to properly punish you. Bah, I'll deal with the two of you another day." He disappeared in a swirl of wind and sand. All about the battlefield the remaining puppets came to halt and fell to the ground inanimate.

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Despite her very best efforts Ino had not been able to control the clay bird she was riding on a slow descent towards the forest. "I am never ever doing this again with someone who is flying." Deidara wailed as the ground approached. Waiting until the last instant Deidara slammed his palms together. "Kai!" He stiffened for an instant and then came to his senses. Right before slamming into a tree. "WHAT!"

Some time later when he finally got his bruised and battered body out of a tangle of shrubs and tree limbs he was **not** happy.

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Kabuto smiled at the woman he still dodged away from. "Well it seems like my work here is done. Too bad about Naruto. Better luck next time."

"What do you mean?" Tsunade demanded.

But Kabuto's only answer was a cheery wave goodbye before leaving in a puff of smoke.

Tsunade stopped and looked about. It seemed that they had won. The fighting was over as all the Akatsuki members seemed to have fled. She felt a cold stab of fear. "I have a bad feeling about this."

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It took five minutes to reach the underground chamber. A number of lethal traps slowed them up just a bit. A broken Hinata warned them where they were and how to avoid or deactivate them. She had told them that they were too late. But Tsunade rushed ahead as fast as possible on the slim hope that some how she might be wrong.

Tsunade's fist smashed open the door to the chamber. It was a vast and empty space, completely empty. Except for one thing.

"NARUTO!" Kushina screamed and ran to her son's side. She dropped to her knees and pulled him up into her arms. His eyes did not open and his head lolled back. She performed a diagnostic jutsu. There was no heart beat. There was no breath. His body was empty of chakra. He was dead.

She held him tighter and pressed her weeping face into his cheek. He was still warm. "No, no, no, no, no, no, oh baby please no. Oh Naruto-kun, my baby, open your eyes and look at me." She began to rock him back and forth in her arms. "It's all right my baby, everything is all right. Mother is here now and I won't let any one ever hurt you." In a voice choking back sobs she began singing a lullaby to him.

Right by her side Hinata also knelt down. She couldn't speak. The sorrow in her heart seemed too much to over come. She let her tears flow and gently took one of his hands and held it in her own.

Everyone gathered around in a respectful silence at the heart wrenching scene. There were tears and silent prayers spoken. Unable to look on Ino buried her face into Chouji's chest. He held her and tried to comfort her. Kiba, Shikamaru, Chouji, Haku, Yamato,



and Lee all felt the terrible pain as well of losing some one they had long known and cared for. Even those who had not known him well, or not known him at all, were deeply saddened by the sight.

Tsunade slowly approached. As she moved time seemed to melt away. Looking down she saw Nawaki's face there. Then she saw Dan's. She remembered the day he had been born. She had been the one to bring him into the world. Her face was the very first thing his eyes had ever seen. She remembered his twelfth birthday, when she had given him the necklace.

*" Knowing you has healed my heart and allowed me to love again." She reached behind her neck and unclasped the necklace. "After Dan died I swore I would never give this to anyone else. But I've decided that once more, just once more, I will put the odds on you."*

*" Tsunade you can't! It's too much!" Kushina gasped.*

*Tsunade looked at her and shook her head. "All this is, is proof of my faith in your son." She turned back to Naruto. "Naruto-kun I accepted the position of Godaime Hokage so I could make sure you would reach your dream one day. Become the good man and great ninja I know you will be and when the time comes I will name you my successor." She placed the necklace around his neck. "Accept from me this necklace and with it my blessing." She leaned forward and kissed his forehead.*

*Naruto hugged her as hard as he could. "I love you godmother!"*

*"I love you too Naruto." Tsunade whispered.*

Kushina heard the words and suddenly looked up. "Tsunade," she pleaded. "Isn't there anything you can do! It can't be too late! He's still warm. Isn't there something you can do?"

And to everyone's surprise, even Kushina's, Tsunade nodded. "Yes there is."

There were gasps from near every throat. Hinata's head suddenly snapped up

"There is?" Kushina was ready to grasp any straw. Her eyes filled with a desperate hope.

Again Tsunade slowly nodded. "There is a jutsu," she explained in a quiet voice as she knelt down as well. "I developed it during the time I was still trying to runaway. I was determined to never lose anyone again. So between gambling sprees and bouts of drunken self pity I would work on an ultimate healing jutsu, one that could cure even a mortal wound. One that could cure even *death* so long as the body was still intact." She noticed something as she gently took Naruto from his mother's arms and laid him back down on the floor. "They didn't take his necklace. I guess the only thing they cared about was the Kyuubi."

"Tsunade-sensei," Hinata managed to speak. "I have never heard of such a jutsu."

"There's a very good reason for that." Tsunade answered. "I never taught it to anyone, not even Shizune. I decided that it was a forbidden technique."

"But why?" Hinata asked. "Why would you make such a wonderful jutsu forbidden?"

"Because of the cost." Tsunade said quietly. "In order to restore a life the caster's life must be sacrificed. Much like the jutsu used by Minato to seal the Kyuubi the **Life Restoration** jutsu requires the sacrifice of a human life."

Kushina looked to her friend. "Take my life for his, I give it gladly."

There were shouts as some told her she could not do such a thing while others also offered to make the sacrifice.

"Quiet!" Tsunade shouted and everyone quieted down. She looked to her friend and shook her head. "It has to be the caster's life."

"Then teach me this jutsu and I'll perform it." Kushina said.

"No, I'm not teaching it to you or anyone else." She sent Hinata a firm look.

Kushina stared at her. Pain and hope and crushing sorrow were all plain to see. She slowly shook her head. "I can't ask this."

"You never asked. It is my choice. I have had a good life. I've lived a lot longer than any ninja should and I've had more adventures than any ten people could expect to. I've known love and friendship. I have had a full life." Reaching down she gently touched his cheek. "I want him to have one. I want him to have his dream and to be happy and to die an old man surrounded by fat grandchildren. I love Naruto, and just like you or Hinata or any of the others who love him I would give my life to save his."

"Hokage-sama, you cannot do this." One of the ANBU spoke up.

"And why not?" She asked calmly.

"Your duty as Hokage is to guard and protect the village."

She nodded. "Yes, that is my duty as Hokage, and that is what I am doing now. Despite my appearance I am no longer young. I cannot protect Konoha's future that is for Naruto to do. Every Hokage has sacrificed themselves to protect and safeguard the village. That is what I am doing now. Naruto **will** be the greatest of all Hokages; he will safeguard and protect Konoha better than I ever could. And to help him with that I give all of you one final order."

She looked about for a moment. "Everything that has happened here is an S-rank secret. No one is to know the details of how I died or how Naruto was rescued. I don't want a bunch of fools hating him for something that was not his fault. He has already had enough of that

in his life." She saw nods from everyone including the ANBU operative who had questioned her.

"Tsunade, I... I don't know how to thank you for this." Kushina struggled to get the words out.

Tsunade reached out and hugged her friend. "There's no need, he's my godson after all. But I would like you to pass on a pair of messages for me."

Kushina nodded eagerly. "Of course."

"First, tell Naruto not to feel any guilt over my death. I know he would give his life to save the people he loves. I am doing the same. Second," she hesitated just a bit. "Please tell Jiraiya that I know he loves me. Tell him that I am very sorry that I could not return his feelings. Tell him I care for him, even if he is a loud mouth pervert." She smiled fondly. "And tell him I'm sorry about the salt."

"Salt?"

"He'll know." She looked to Hinata. "There is also one thing I'd like you to promise me as well Hinata."

"Anything Tsunade-sensei!"

"Just always be there when he needs you, even if he doesn't want to admit that he does."

Hinata nodded fiercely. "I will always be there for him and will never let him go again."

Tsunade smiled. "You are a good girl Hinata, and Naruto is very lucky to have you." At last she looked down at his form and began forming dozens of hand signs faster than any eye could follow. Except those with the sharingan. "Now then."

She completed the jutsu and placed both hands upon his chest. Green chakra surrounded her entire form as she poured not only

chakra but her life energy into him.

The silence was total as every eye watched as the Godaime Hokage began to sweat and to pant. Kushina put an arm around her both to support her and offer comfort.

As Tsunade poured more and more of herself into the transfer she could feel herself weakening and beginning to become cold. She had no second thoughts. She loved him like a son and was as willing as his mother to sacrifice her self for his sake.

Out her life force flowed into him. She was growing tired very quickly, but she would last long enough to finish it, and then she would rest.

*I am very sorry I will never get to see you as Hokage my sweet boy. I know you will make me proud just as you always have. Be a great Naruto-kun and always do what you know to be right. The future is yours.*

As she neared the end she felt his heart begin to beat again and chakra pulsed once more.

"He's alive!" Hinata cried out joyously.

And as if to prove it he gasped and opened his eyes. He looked up in confusion. "Godmother?" He barely whispered.

She smiled. "I love you Naruto." With that she shut her eyes and fell back to be caught by Kushina.

Carefully holding her Kushina set her down gently on the stone floor.

He felt completely weak and exhausted. The last time he'd felt like this was after being beaten near to death by that Jonin while he was an academy student. His mind was fuzzy and he didn't know what was happening. He saw Hinata kneeling over him crying and he could feel her gentle touch on his cheek. "Hinata-chan," he rasped out. "Am I dead? Is this heaven?"

And she smiled for him. "No my Naruto-kun, you're alive." Leaning down she kissed him and then pressed her cheek to his as she wept. "You're alive."

## The Rokudaime Hokage

The sun was climbing up into the sky. After everything that had happened they had all pretty much agreed a rest was called for. They had searched out the base to find it containing nothing of real value. There was nothing that hinted where other bases might be or what future plans Akatsuki might have. A pair of the ANBU had been sent to retrieve Kakashi and bring him over. After what had happened there had been condolences and words of sympathy. But surprisingly little more had been said to him. What was there to say exactly?

"How long are we going to leave him alone?" Hinata said worriedly.

"Leave him be Hinata." Kushina said calmly. "After everything he has been through he needs a little time."

"Well he needs to eat." She took a small bowl filled with rice. "As a medic nin I know how much he needs food right now to get his strength back." She began walking towards him.

Kushina watched her go with a small smile. Secretly pleased to see Hinata behaving very much like a wife.

They were all outside having lunch and resting. Given the strain they had all endured to get here it only made sense now to get some food and rest before making the trip home. Everyone turned to look as Hinata left the group and headed off.

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When he had first been revived he'd been as weak as a kitten and badly disoriented. He had slowly recovered some strength along with his senses. At that point Kushina had taken him aside and explained what had happened. After that he had begged to be left alone for awhile and gone a ways into the nearby forest. Hinata's instinct had been to go after him but Kushina had convinced her and the others

to give him some time alone. Hinata had kept an eye on him with her byakugan just in case. Now he'd had a few hours and Hinata was going to see him whether he wanted her to or not.

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He was just sitting there, his back against a large oak. As she approached him she knew he could sense her presence, but he didn't react. He just sat there looking off into the distance. She came to a halt about ten feet from him and just waited for a bit. It would be easier if he would acknowledge she was there. But he just sat there.

Finally she spoke up. "Naruto-kun you need to eat something, I've brought you some nice steamed rice."

"I'm not hungry." He said dully.

"Naruto-kun you haven't eaten in three days. You need to eat to regain your strength."

"I'm not hungry Hinata-chan. I'll eat a ration bar later."

She sighed. A ration bar was actually healthier than a bowl of rice. The only bad thing about them was that they tasted like pasty cardboard. "Fine." She set the bowl down and reached into a pouch. She pulled out a ration bar and approached him holding it out. "Here, eat it now."

He looked over to the offering without any enthusiasm. "I'll have it later."

"Naruto-kun I am not leaving here until I see you eat something." She said in a firm voice.

He looked up at her face. With a resigned sigh he took the bar from her and unwrapped it. He shoved about half of it into his mouth and slowly began to chew. He had to stop and drink some water from his canteen. She could see him make a face as he kept on chewing. Well he could have had rice. Finally he swallowed the nutritious, if



bland, paste in his mouth. Without a word he shoved in the rest of the bar and took another swig of water. Hinata stood there patiently as he chewed, and chewed. Finally he swallowed it down.

He looked at her with a frown. "Happy now?"

She slowly nodded. "I just wanted to get you to eat something."

"Well now I've eaten." He looked away from her again and stared off into the forest.

She waited there for a long moment hoping he would say something more to her. Finally she picked the bowl back up. "I'm sorry if I'm bothering you." She said quietly and turned to leave.

"Hinata-chan." He called to her and she stopped in her tracks. "Hinata-chan, I'm... I'm sorry if I'm being a jerk. You never bother me. I'm just... I don't know. I don't know what I'm doing; I don't know anything right now." It was one of the very few times she had ever seen or heard him be confused.

"It's all right Naruto-kun, after everything that has happened you're allowed to be a bit of a mess. But please don't push away all the people who want to help you." Her voice ached. "I don't want to see you all alone."

He slowly nodded and tried to smile. It was a pale imitation of his usual smile but she was still glad to see it.

"Naruto-kun can I please sit with you?" She asked longingly. It might have been a bit selfish of her, but she wanted to be with him. She ached just for the simple comfort of his body resting against hers.

He slowly nodded. "Sure Hinata-chan."

With a relieved sigh she put the bowl down again and sat down beside him. He put an arm around her and she snuggled close to him as she rested her head on his warm shoulder.

Nothing more was said between them as they just sat there in a comforting silence.

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"I wonder what Hinata is going to say to him." Haku spoke.

"She is probably going to tell him just how much she loves him and just how relieved she is that he's all right." Gabrella said quietly.

Tayuya grinned. "Or maybe she's going to push him down on the grass and *show* him how much she loves him."

Gabrella shot her teammate an angry look. "Do you have to be so damn vulgar?"

Tayuya stiffened and gave the other girl a harsh look of her own. "What the hell is vulgar about it? If the boy I loved came back from the dead you had better believe that's exactly what I'd do." She sent Haku a sidelong glance.

"Hey I saw that!" Gabrella took a menacing step forward.

"Saw what princess?" Tayuya took a step forward as well.

With a tired sigh Haku stepped between them. As on so many other occasions he tried to play peacemaker. "Do you two really want to fight with everyone watching?"

The two girls sent him identical looks that were equal parts annoyance and hostility.

Before either of them could say or do anything more Guy suddenly shouted. "Yosh! Someone is coming!"

That immediately got everyone's attention. People got to their feet and looked on as a figure leapt out of the forest.

The ninja landed near them and immediately bent over and put his hands on his knees as he was panting. "I... guess... I missed... it."

Jiraiya caught his breath. "Is Naruto all right?"

Kushina, Guy, Asuma, and Tenzo all shared a look. "Yes, Naruto-kun is fine." Kushina was finally the one to answer. "He and Hinata are off on their own right now."

Jiraiya smiled and looked relieved. "I knew the kid would be all right. I'm just sorry I didn't get here in time to help." He looked around. "So where is Tsunade? Knowing her she probably wants to yell at me for being late."

Kushina took a deep breath. "Jiraiya, there is something I need to tell you."

---

Tsunade's body had been left inside where it was a bit cooler. She had been placed on a mat with her eyes closed and her hands folded upon her chest. In death she looked not at all like she had in life. Her concealing jutsu was gone. Her hair was mostly grey with only a bit of blonde still left. Her perfect skin was wrinkled with spots, especially along her arms. On her face were deep lines radiating from her eyes and the corners of her mouth. She was revealed as what she truly was; a woman in her late fifties who had seen a lot of travel and lived a lot of life.

To Jiraiya she was every bit as beautiful as she had always been. "Oh Tsunade," he whispered. He looked to Naruto and Kushina who were the only others present. "You know it's almost funny. I never once thought I'd be the last Sannin. She was the one with the family name and all the natural talent. Orochimaru was the genius. And me? I was the fool, the screw up." He chuckled dryly. "But here I am last one standing."

He fell silent. The three of them just stood there looking down at her.

"Do you hate me?" Naruto suddenly asked in a choked sob. Kushina and Naruto both looked at him startled. "This was my fault. She died because of me."

Jiraiya reached out and grabbed him by the front of his shirt and yanked him forward so they were face to face about an inch apart. "Don't ever say that again kid!" Jiraiya growled at him. "She died because of the Akatsuki, not because of you. She made a choice Naruto, just like your father did, just like the old man did, don't blame yourself kid, 'cause I don't."

Naruto felt the shame consume him. He also was very afraid what Jiraiya would think of him. But he swallowed and told him. "Itachi captured me because I was stupid and arrogant. I got a message at my hotel saying there was an ANBU messenger waiting for me to deliver a special message. I *knew* that wasn't standard procedure. Even if the message was for me it would have been sent through my squad leader, Kakashi. I should have known better, I should have called in Kakashi and the rest of my team. But I honestly thought that Tsunade was giving me a special mission only I could handle. And when I got there I knew it was Itachi. I decided to fight. I didn't try to call for help or to run. Maybe I couldn't have, it was over so quick maybe it was already too late. But I didn't try to call for help because I figured I was tough enough to handle it." Naruto cast his eyes down, no longer able to bear looking at Jiraiya's.

"Naruto how could you do something so stupid?" Jiraiya's voice was not angry but frustrated. "How many times did I remind you that Akatsuki would always be a danger to you? How many times did I warn you to be aware of possible traps? And just how many times did I try to drive the concept of, 'strategic withdrawal' into that thick skull of yours? What, did you really believe that just because you could pull off the Hiraishin that you were invincible?" Jiraiya could see the boy's face redden. "You did didn't you? Naruto, if being a ninja taught you nothing else it should have taught you that *anyone* can be taken out with the right circumstances. No one is invincible all the time."

"I know that." He whimpered. "I'm so sorry."

Jiraiya let go of his grip and took a deep breath. "Naruto look at me." Naruto hesitated before raising his eyes to look at the older man's

face. Jiraiya was frowning but did not seem angry. Naruto flinched a bit as Jiraiya placed a hand on his shoulder. "Listen kid I'm not going to lie, what you did was stupid. And you really should have known better. But that said even if you had done the smart thing and called in your team there is *still* a chance you would have been captured. With an enemy like Itachi after you there was always a chance of that, especially when you were away on a mission. If you had been captured through no fault of your own things would have played out **exactly** the same way. Learn from your mistake Naruto, but don't blame yourself. That is the last thing Tsunade would have wanted."

"But if I had just..."

"Just what?" Jiraiya cut off sharply. "Been smarter? Been stronger? Then none of this would have happened? Maybe," Naruto flinched. "And maybe you would have been captured three months from now instead. Maybe one of your teammates would have been killed. Maybe you would have been. So long as Akatsuki was determined to take you the possibility of something like this happening was always there. You could have handled things better Naruto, no doubt, but even if you had there still might have been tragedy." Jiraiya looked away from him and back down at her. "A ninja's life is filled with the tragic Naruto, that is something you should all ready know well. Don't blame yourself, blame Akatsuki."

Naruto very slowly nodded, relieved that Jiraiya did not hate him. "Arigato."

"Don't thank me kid," Jiraiya said as he took out a scroll, inkpot, and brush. "I haven't done anything." He quickly filled out the scroll. "**Seal.**" Tsunade's body disappeared and was transferred into the scroll. "I will carry her back to Konoha." He was not making a request.

Kushina looked at her son and was careful to hide her disappointment. She'd expected better from him. She had taught him a long time ago not to take foolish chances. But looking at his sorrow

she knew the lesson had already been driven home. She would not say anything. Jiraiya had pretty much said it all any way.

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As the three of them left the base they saw everyone standing around waiting on them. One of the ANBU approached them and bowed. "Naruto-sama, we have all eaten and rested. What are your orders?"

Naruto looked at the man in shock. "What are you asking me for? Ask my mom or Jiraiya or Asuma."

Despite the mask Naruto could see the surprise on the man. "But Naruto-sama," the man said carefully. "You are now Hokage and therefore have final authority."

Naruto stiffened and looked at the man as though he were insane. "Are you kidding? I am **not** the Hokage."

Yamato had removed his mask and stepped forward. "Actually Naruto you are. You were officially appointed successor with the approval of both Tsunade-sama and the Council. By law, with the previous Hokage's death, you automatically become Hokage." With that Yamato stiffened and performed a deep bow. "Hokage-sama."

The other ANBU did the same. And not just the ANBU.

"Hokage-sama." Asuma said and bowed.

"Hokage-sama." Guy said and bowed. Lee eagerly followed his sensei's example as did Tenten.

Shikamaru, Ino, and Chouji all looked at one another before they also bowed and acknowledged him Hokage.

"Hokage-sama." Haku bowed to him with a happy smile. Gabrella offered a formal bow while Tayuya bent forward just a bit and mumbled something.

Hinata sent him a blissful look as she offered him a deep and formal bow. "Hokage-sama." Kiba looked amused but bowed as well. Kakashi was lying on his back but offered a wave.

Seeing so many of the people he cared for actually bowing to him and calling him Hokage seemed surreal to him. "But... but there hasn't been any ceremony. I can't be Hokage."

Jiraiya grinned. "Sorry to tell you this kid, but the law says that you are. There'll still be a coronation, but that's just to give the public a chance to celebrate your installation. You really are the Rokudaime Hokage now. Try not to screw it up." And with that Jiraiya took a step back and offered him one of the very few bows he ever gave anyone. "Hokage-sama."

His mom smiled. Naruto grabbed her arm and whispered to her in panic. "Mom please don't, it's weird enough seeing Jiraiya and Hinata do it."

Laughing Kushina leaned forward and gave her son a kiss on the cheek. "I'll consider that the very first order from the new Hokage. I am so very proud of you Naruto-kun."

He looked at her worriedly and whispered to her. "Mom, I don't think I'm worthy of being Hokage."

She nodded sympathetically and gave her son a hug. She whispered in his ear. "It's all right Naruto-kun, no one ever is."

# The secret

**Author's Note:** Now to start I would like to go ahead and thank all of you who continue to read my story and leave reviews. To be honest having over **four thousand** reviews blows me away. I have written nine other stories and combined they don't have a quarter as many reviews. Now I have noticed that quite a few people are upset with the direction this story is taking. I am sorry to see that, but in a way I take it as a compliment. That some one actually cares enough about this story to be upset by Naruto's behavior or Tsuande's death says a lot. That said I will continue to write the story that I want and take it in the direction that interests me. Now I have also noticed that quite a few of you are wondering if this story is coming to its end. Rest assured it is **not**. Now that Naruto has achieved his dream the story will move in a new direction that should be clear by the end of this chapter. I had thought about ending the story here and making a sequel but have decided to continue it under one title.

P.S.- Any of you who would like to help me win a contest please go to the fanfic site for Jesse Briceno his id number is 1362644 and vote for both this story and for me as author.

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Everyone was getting ready to depart.

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"So she cared for me?" Jiraiya said with a fond smile.

Kushina nodded. "What exactly did she mean by salt?"

Jiraiya chuckled but declined to explain.

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"Yosh my eternal rival are you prepared to go?" Without waiting for an answer Guy grabbed him and put him on his back. The image was just a bit disturbing



"This isn't really necessary Guy!" A panicked Kakashi spoke up.

"Nonsense my eternal rival! As both a fellow Leaf ninja and as your lifelong rival it is my duty to aid you in your time of distress." Guy laughed. "Besides, it will be good training."

Hearing his sensei mention training Lee's eyes lit up. He immediately turned to his teammate.

Tenten saw the look in his eyes and took out a kunai menacingly. "Don't even think about it!"

---

"Naruto-kun," Hinata called to him. "Before we go there's something I want to give you." She pulled out her backpack and took something out that was covered by a blanket.

Naruto looked at her curiously. "What is it Hinata-chan?" she pulled back the blanket to reveal the object. "Oh! My katana." He carefully took it from her. "Arigato Hinata-chan, I was afraid it was lost."

She shook her head. "I would never have left it behind; I know how much it means to you."

He grinned and nodded. "Yeah," he cut his palm.

"What are you doing?" She asked crossly.

Naruto looked a bit sheepish. "Well I did draw it to fight. That means I have to give it blood before I put it back." He quickly wiped the sword down and put it into his scabbard.

"Naruto-kun you don't have the Kyuubi's chakra to heal you anymore." Hinata pointed out.

Naruto just shrugged. "Neither does my mom, she still does it though. It's..."

"An Uzumaki clan tradition, I know." Hinata sighed unhappily. She'd never liked this particular tradition. "Well let me heal you." She took his hand and examined the wound. Her eyes widened. "Naruto-kun look!"

A bit surprised by her reaction he looked at his palm. The cut was almost completely closed. It had not healed as fast as it would have before, but it was close. "I don't understand, I don't have the Kyuubi anymore how can I still have my healing?"

Hinata smiled. "It's probably a little like building up an immunity. If you get sick your body learns how to fight off the sickness. So the next time you get the same infection your body knows how to deal with it and is able to do so much more quickly. My guess is that after all the years of the Kyuubi's chakra being used to heal you your body has developed the same method using your own chakra. And like before you don't need to do anything, your body will heal you on its own." Seeing his big smile she pressed on. " **But** keep in mind that since this will be using your chakra instead of the Kyuubi's it won't be as effective."

Naruto slowly nodded. "That makes sense I guess. It's still a lot better than nothing. I wonder what else has stayed the same."

With a little grin Hinata reached out and stroked his cheek. "Well I'm going to miss your, 'whiskers' I always thought they were cute."

Kiba came over with Akamaru walking beside him. "Hey Naruto, why don't you go ahead and ride on Akamaru on the way back?" Akamaru yipped his agreement.

Naruto shook his head. "No thanks, I'll go on my own strength."

Hinata shook her head and crossed her arms. "No you will not Naruto-kun, you still haven't fully recovered. You can ride on Akamaru or I'll get Jiraiya to carry you."

Naruto looked over to where Guy was walking around with Kakashi draped over his back and shuddered. "You know on second thought I guess I could ride on Akamaru's back after all."

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It took them three days to get back to Konoha. Messages were sent ahead that the rescue had been successful, but with loss. Nothing more was revealed before they returned. Once they were back an emergency meeting of the Council was called.

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Naruto was pacing back and forth in a small room in the tower near the meeting room.

"I don't think I can do this." Naruto said again.

"Yes you can Naruto-kun." His mother answered yet again. "You have been preparing for this your entire life."

He turned to her. "Mom I'm only fifteen! I thought I would have a few more years to get ready. Will they even accept a fifteen year old Hokage?"

"Of course they will Naruto." Jiraiya affirmed. "We live in a society where twelve year olds can command adults four times their age and no one thinks twice about it. In the ninja world it is ability alone that counts."

"I really don't think I'm ready for this." Naruto confessed. "I've screwed up so badly."

"You have." Jiraiya decided not to minimize things. "And if you make those same mistakes as Hokage your entire village will suffer for them." Kushina gave him an unhappy look. She was trying to build up his confidence not tear it down.

Naruto frowned and stopped his pacing. "Does that mean you think I should quit?"

"Absolutely not," Jiraiya said. "What it means is that you'll have to stop being stupid and reckless. I've known you your whole life kid, so believe me when I say this. There is **no one else** that I would trust more to take care of this village. I know just how seriously you take this responsibility and how committed you are to it. The doubts you are feeling right now don't change the fact that you are ready for this."

"But what if I still make mistakes?" Naruto asked.

Jiraiya grinned. "Oh don't worry about that, because I'll guarantee that you **will** make mistakes. Let me share a little secret with you kid, *all* the Hokages made mistakes. They *all* made decisions that they regretted later on. And you want to know why? Because they were all human, and last I checked all human beings are flawed." He chuckled. "Well I know a few Uchihas who would probably disagree."

"So I'm going into this knowing I'll be making mistakes?" Naruto asked.

Jiraiya nodded. "The trick is to not make any really big mistakes. In the end Naruto, all you can do is your best. Do what you believe to be right Naruto and I know you will never go too far wrong."

There was a knock on the door and Yamato stuck his head in. "The Council has assembled, Naruto-sama."

Naruto nodded, it was still weird but he was starting to get used to it. "Thanks." He looked at Jiraiya and his mom. "What if they ask me why I should be Hokage? What do I say?"

"Tell them the truth Naruto-kun." Kushina said firmly. "Tell them you are the son of their greatest hero and have spent your entire life preparing for this. Tell them your loyalty to Konoha never wavered despite the hatred that met you. Tell them by the time you stepped foot in the academy you were as powerful as most of your teachers. Tell them that you killed the Kazekage and over three hundred enemy ninjas when your village was attacked. Tell them you helped

kill Orochimaru. Tell them you have been trained by two of the Sannin. Tell them that you, and you alone, successfully rediscovered your father's prized jutsu, the jutsu many consider the most powerful ever created in the leaf village. Tell them you were Tsunade's only choice to succeed her. And above all else tell them this; that you are Namikaze Naruto and you **are** the Rokudaime Hokage."

Naruto slowly nodded. "I am the Rokudaime Hokage." He took a deep breath and said it again. "I am the Rokudaime Hokage." He headed out the door followed closely by Jiraiya and Kushina.

---

As the door to the meeting room opened all eyes turned towards the three of them. Kushina gave her son a quick hug and went over to her seat as Naruto and Jiraiya headed to the front of the table, the place normally reserved for the Hokage. Naruto had discussed what would need to happen with his mom and Jiraiya. He was legally Hokage and nothing short of a civil war could change that. But things would go much better for him if he had the Council's support right from the start.

Naruto's expression was blank now. He had pushed all the doubts away and would show them someone who was certain of himself. His eyes scanned the fifteen members who were seated. His mom, uncle Shinzou, Hiashi, Shikamaru, Chouji, Asuma, and Tsume; he was certain that they would support him. That gave him the backing of almost half the Council right there. And with Jiraiya standing beside him he was sure he could get most of the others. He and Jiraiya stood at the head of the table near the empty chair. Naruto did not sit down, not yet.

There were nervous looks on many of the faces. Of those present only he Jiraiya, his mom, Shikamaru, Chouji, and Asuma knew the truth. There had been no time to tell anyone before the meeting.

"Where is Tsunade-sama?" Uchiha Riyuki asked.

Jiraiya looked down the table and answered solemnly. "I am afraid she is gone. She was the lone casualty of the fight against Akatsuki and the rescue mission."

Jiraiya might as well have tossed an explosive note into the middle of the room. Suddenly everyone seemed to be standing and shouting. Well, everyone who did not already know. Naruto stood there and remained silent. His mom and Jiraiya had told him how this was likely to go and the last thing he wanted was to appear arrogant or to offend anyone on the council.

"How did this happen?" Koharu's voice somehow cut through the noise and people quieted down to hear the answer.

"That I cannot tell you." Jiraiya replied. "Before she died Tsunade declared all details of the mission to be an S-rank secret." The way he said it one would believe Jiraiya had heard it for himself. He had no intention of telling them he'd learned of her death hours after the fact.

"You mean to keep secrets from us?" Danzo demanded. "We are the Council of Konoha!"

Jiraiya smirked unimpressed. "So what? There are plenty of things kept from the Council." He sent Danzo an amused look. "That's something *you* know quite well."

Danzo looked displeased but did not argue.

"What are we to do now?" Riyuki asked.

"About what?" Shikamaru asked innocently.

"About the position of Hokage." Riyuki clarified. "If the Hokage is dead then we must find a replacement immediately. It would be a dangerous sign of weakness for us to be without a strong leader."

"I'm sorry," Jiraiya spoke up. "Were you not there when the Council elected a successor?"

Riyuki's eyes widened as the full implications only now hit him. "You can't mean to place Naruto into that position!"

Jiraiya frowned and sent the man a hard look. "I mean exactly that. Naruto was nominated by Tsunade and was approved by a majority of this council. He was legally appointed successor and as per the law of succession he **is** Hokage now."

That set off a whole new barrage of argument as Naruto's supporters and opponents argued with one another.

"He is too young and inexperienced to be Hokage!" Yamanka Mishio stated.

"He has been a Jonin since he was twelve. He spent two and a half years receiving training from me. To say nothing of the instruction he has received in preparation of becoming Namikaze clan head. Despite his youth he has seen more combat and difficult missions than most ninjas twice his age." Jiraiya declared.

"It is too dangerous to have him as Hokage given what is inside of him." Riyuki declared.

"You mean the Kyuubi?" Naruto asked, finally breaking his silence.

The room suddenly quieted down at the sound of that word.

Taking a deep breath Riyuki nodded. "Yes, I do not mean to offend you, but we cannot pretend that the Kyuubi does not exist."

Naruto sent him a smile that had absolutely no humor behind. "Well then, let me ease your mind. I no longer possess the Kyuubi. It was removed from me by the Akatsuki." The silence in the room was total as the implications of that one sentence struck home.

"What?" Naruto looked around the table. "Isn't that good news?"

Danzo was the first to find his voice. "How can you possibly think it good that our enemies now have access to such incredible power?"

"Oh, so now all of a sudden you *want* me to have the Kyuubi in my guts again?" He sent him an angry glare. "A minute ago Riyuki here was complaining I couldn't be trusted because I had the Kyuubi's power. Now you complain that someone else has it. I would love to know what it would take to make all of you happy!" They all stared at him and his open display of anger. Even Jiraiya and Kushina were staring as this was no part of the plan to win over the council.

Naruto looked at all of them and decided to give them all a very large dose of truth. "I am sorrier than any of you will ever know that Tsunade-sama is gone, and that she died to save me. I loved her very much, and even though it was my dream to be Hokage I never wanted it like this. I am sorry that I was captured and I am sorry that the Akatsuki now have the Kyuubi. If I could change what has happened I would. But all I can do is make sure that my godmother's sacrifice wasn't for nothing." With that he slowly and deliberately sat down in the head chair.

"What do you think you are doing?" Koharu demanded.

"Sitting in my seat." Naruto answered. "Whether any of you like it or not I **am** the Hokage now and if I have to I'll fight for my position. If some of you feel that you cannot follow me then I invite you to resign from this council, because I am not going anywhere." There were gasps at his blunt statement. "I have decided that I am going to be Hokage. Not for myself and not for my father, but for everyone in this village. I may be young but I *know* what needs to be done to protect Konoha and I really think I am the only one who can do it."

He looked about the table once again. "I am sorry if this sounds arrogant, I don't mean it to be. But Konoha is in great danger. The Akatsuki and their leader are a greater threat than any this village has ever known and I truly believe that I am the one who can stop them. I **will** stop them. I ask for your help. Help me to protect and guard Konoha." His last words were an open invitation to them.



Surprisingly it was Shikamaru who spoke next in a firm calm voice. "This whole situation is very troublesome. With the Kyuubi the Akatsuki now possess the strongest piece on the board. That will make the game more difficult, but more interesting too." He looked from his fellow council members to Naruto. "I have known Naruto since I was eight. And I can honestly say to you that there is no one else in the world I trust more. I would trust him with my life and with the fate of this village. Jiraiya also trusts him as did the Fifth. I say we can all trust him to lead us."

Naruto smiled at his friend. "Arigato Shikamaru."

Shikamaru nodded. "I am at your service Hokage-sama."

With Shikamaru's acknowledgement his other close supporters joined in stating that they recognized him and would follow him. With so much strength revealed most of the rest of the council went along. Except for one person.

Yamanaka Mishio stood up. "I will not recognize you as Hokage."

Jiraiya frowned. "You cannot sit on the Council if you refuse to recognize the Hokage's authority."

"Then I resign." Mishio said with dignity.

Naruto nodded and said not a word as Mishio left. He already knew who he wanted to take his place. "I thank all of you for your support and I promise I will give everything I have to protect this village. Now, if there are no objections I would like to bring this meeting to an end. I would like to ask Jiraiya, my mother, and Shikamaru to remain." He looked over to where Yamato remained at attention. "Yamato could you please see if Kakashi is in condition to be moved? If he is please have him come here as well. Hiashi, could you please ask Hinata to come here?"

---

Before long the people he had asked for were in the meeting room. Kakashi was sitting in a wheelchair but seemed awake and well. Naruto had then requested Yamato to remain as well. Before him Jiraiya, his mom, Hinata, Shikamaru, Kakashi, and Yamato waited for what he had to say.

"What is this about kid?" Jiraiya asked. "You never said anything about a second meeting."

Naruto nodded. "I'm sorry; I wasn't sure how to go about this. Now before I start what I am going to tell you is an S-rank secret. No one outside this room is to be told about it. I asked for the six of you specifically because I would trust my life with any of you and I am going to need your help."

"Naruto-kun," Hinata asked. "Why isn't Kiba here too? And what about Haku?"

"I trust Kiba and Haku, but I need to keep this to as few people as possible." Naruto explained. "Jiraiya, Kakashi, and Yamato will be getting special missions from me while I want you, mom, and Shikamaru to be able to advise me and maybe go with me on missions."

Kushina perked up. "Son you're Hokage now. You can't just leave the village to go on missions."

Naruto shook his head. "I'm going to have to mom. I'm the only one who can work the Hiraishin. That means there are certain things that only I can do."

"Why do I get the feeling this is going to be really, really troublesome?" Shikamaru complained.

"Probably because it is. Now along with being secret I am going to ask all of you to keep an open mind about what I am about to tell you."

The six of them all directed their attention to him. "What is this about Naruto-kun?" His mother asked worried.

Naruto swallowed. "It's about a secret that I was told as I was dying."

"What?" Jiraiya spoke. "The Akatsuki told you a secret?"

Naruto shook his head. "No, it wasn't them. I don't remember who it was. When I try to remember all I get is this fuzzy memory of someone trying to help me. Maybe it was a shinigami or the ghost of someone I knew. All I know is that it was someone I knew I could trust." Looks passed between everyone. "I know how this sounds."

"Look kid, I'm sure you *believe* you got a message from beyond. But it's a lot more likely that it was a dream."

Naruto shook his head. "Shinigami are real. Souls are real. Hell is real. Demons are real. All these things we know to exist for a fact. They are as real chakra. Is it that hard to believe that someone or something was able to speak to me?"

"Can you prove it?" Jiraiya asked.

"No, but I'm sure that the secret was real, and I intend to act on the information. It's too important not too." Naruto paused. "To be honest it's part of the reason I decided I had to be Hokage."

"If you are sure Naruto-kun, then I am too." Hinata said.

Jiraiya grunted. "Well I won't go that far, but if you tell us what it is I'll consider it."

Naruto leaned back in his chair. "I know what the Akatsuki mean to do with the biju they are gathering."

Jiraiya leaned forward. He was not sure how much faith he put in this, but he was interested. "All right, I'll bite. What is it for?"

"A weapon." Naruto answered simply. "Their leader believes he can use the biju to power a weapon that can destroy whole nations in an instant. He thinks having a weapon so terrible will force people to admit the futility of war and bring on a golden age of peace."

"That's horrible!" Hinata said. Just imagining such a weapon filled her with dread.

"Oh it's much worse than that Hinata-chan." Naruto said quietly.

"Worse?" Kakashi spoke up. "What could be worse than the Akatsuki with a weapon that can lay waste to whole nations?"

"The fact that it won't work, or maybe I should say it will work too well. The biju cannot be used in the way their leader plans. Their power cannot be controlled once unleashed. If this weapon is used it will release a fire that will never go out." He leaned back and shut his eyes. "It will be the end of the world."

## Thunderous applause

They were all just staring at him.

"So let me just clarify this." Shikamaru spoke up. "The Akatsuki are trying to create a weapon that could destroy the whole world and it's up to us to stop them?"

Naruto nodded. "Yeah, that pretty much sums it up."

Shikamaru slowly shook his head. "All right I take it back. Troublesome doesn't even begin to describe this."

"Naruto-kun," Hinata asked. "Why aren't you telling the council this? Something this important shouldn't they know about it?"

"Two reasons Hinata-chan," Naruto said. "One, I don't think they'd believe me. Especially not if I told them where I was getting my intelligence from. If I were to go to them now with this the council would just try to oppose me and maybe use it as an excuse to try and unseat me. If later on I decide I need to tell them I'll say it's information that Jiraiya uncovered."

"You're going to lie to the Council?" Hinata sounded shocked.

"If I need to." Naruto said. "A ninja village pretty much runs on secrets. If I have to keep a few, or more than a few, from the Council I will. Kami knows that Danzo and Riyuki have kept their share."

"Naruto," Kakashi spoke. "What's the other reason?"

"From what I can gather from Kisame's interrogation none of the other members of Akatsuki know what the ultimate goal is. Right now Pein thinks it's his secret. I want him to keep thinking that. It gives us an advantage."

"All right," Shikamaru spoke slowly and certainly. "Let's just assume for a moment that everything you've said here is true. The Akatsuki really do plan to blow up the world once they have all the biju. How exactly do we stop them?"

"There are two ways and we're going to pursue both of them. First off even with the Kyuubi there are still other biju out there. The Akatsuki won't act until they've acquired all of them."

"Wait a minute." Shikamaru spoke. "What about the Shukaku one tail that was in Gaara? There's no way for them to acquire all the biju now."

Naruto nodded. "True, but Pein obviously believes he can still make things work with the remaining eight. We have to deny him those eight. And while we're at it we need to kill him. Pein is the key. Building this weapon is his idea and he is the sole motivating force behind it. Once he's dead the threat from this weapon will be over." He looked at all the faces that were looking back at him. "I know I'm asking for a pretty big leap of faith here. All I can tell you is that I'm sure enough about this to put my own life on the line for it."

"I believe you Naruto." Jiraiya said quietly.

"You do?" Naruto said with relief.

Jiraiya nodded. "I do." The Sannin looked about the table himself. "I'm going to reveal a very special secret to all of you now. Something I have never spoken about to another human being." *Though I have talked about it with some frogs.* "When I was a young man I was summoned by the great and ancient sage toad who gave me a prophecy. He told me I would wander the earth and that one day one of my students would either bring the world peace or destroy it. He would be the destiny child and his actions would decide the fate of the world." He paused and the silence in the room was total. "I have had total of seven students in my life. The three in the Yondaime's squad, three war orphans I ran into in Rain country, and you Naruto. You're the only one left. All the others are gone now."

With what you've just said I am now convinced that you are the destiny child and that you will either save the world and bring peace or cause it to be destroyed."

No one spoke for a long moment.

Finally one voice summed up what everyone was thinking.

"Man what a drag."

---

Shikamaru entered his home dragging his feet. He had been given a whole lot to think about. As was his habit he had taken a few moments to quietly absorb the information and come up with the proper plan of action. That didn't mean he was eager to put his plan into action. He could hear both his mom and Temari in the kitchen. "Man this is going to be troublesome."

As he entered the kitchen both women looked up. His mom was putting some chicken in a pan while Temari was chopping some onions.

"Well you're back late." Temari stated. "How was the council meeting?"

"Very, very, long and very, very troublesome." He moved over to Temari's side.

"Anything you can share with us?" Yoshino asked.

Shikamaru shrugged. "Only that the council acknowledged Naruto as Hokage except for Mishio who resigned." He had already told them about Tsunade and about Naruto's being Hokage now so it did not come as a shock to either of them.

"Mishio huh?" Temari commented. "I'm surprised it wasn't Riyuki."

"I'm not," Shikamaru said. "Riyuki's not one for pointless gestures." He was standing right beside Temari as she chopped onions. "Temari?"

She didn't look up from what she was doing. "Yeah?"

"Will you marry me?"

Her face jerked up as she very nearly cut off a finger by mistake. "What?!"

There was a loud crash as a tray full of chicken fell on the floor. Both women were now staring at him with open mouths.

This got a roll of his eyes from Shikamaru. "I asked if you would marry me you troublesome woman."

She continued to just stare at him for a moment. Then without warning she balled up a fist and smacked him on the top of his head.

"Ow!" He stepped away from her as he rubbed the top of his skull. "What the hell was that for?! I thought you'd be happy!"

She just glared at him. "This is supposed to be one of the most romantic and memorable moments in a woman's life! And you just blurt it out while I'm chopping onions?"

He continued rubbing his head. "Fine then! If that's how you feel about it forget I asked."

He turned to go. Before he could take a step though a kitchen knife sailed within an inch of his left ear and embedded itself in the kitchen door. He froze. Temari was suddenly standing in front of him and he was expecting a real beating. To his immense relief though she seemed to take a deep breath and calm down just a bit.

"Shikamaru you can't ask something like that and then just take it back. Not unless you want me to smother you in your sleep tonight."



She took a second deep breath. "Now I want to know if you're serious."

The way she was staring at him it was obvious there was only one answer to that question that would allow him to remain alive. "Of course I'm serious; I wouldn't be risking my life otherwise."

She crossed her arms and looked at him suspiciously. "Why now all of a sudden?"

"I'm afraid the world might end soon and I don't want to die a virgin." He answered with a straight face.

He saw her eyes darken and he knew he should have lied.

"Ow!" He began to rub a second bump on his head. "Damn it woman you're going to give me a concussion."

"Want to try answering that again?" She growled.

"Fine," he muttered and quickly came up with something he hoped would be acceptable. "The Fifth was one of the most powerful ninjas in the world, a true ninja legend. And I saw her die just three days ago. If someone like Tsunade could be killed then obviously it could happen to me anytime." Both Temari and Yoshino nodded. Memories of Gaara, Kankuro, and Shikaku came to mind. "I just decided that there was no good reason to keep waiting since I know I love you and want to be with you."

Now a slight smile touched her lips. "Well I guess I can understand that. You still could have at least made an effort to be just a *little* romantic but I guess that would be expecting too much from you."

She put her arms around his neck and leaned in to give him a deep and long kiss. Both of them momentarily forgetting that Yoshino was standing right there. "I know I'll probably regret this you lazy baka, but the answer's yes. I will marry you."

---

Naruto was in his room finally getting ready for bed. It had been a very long and stressful day and the next several were all going to be just as busy. He had on only shorts and a tee shirt and was about to go to bed when there was a knock on his door.

"Come in." He called out assuming that it had to be his mom.

So he was rather surprised when the door opened and in stepped Hinata wearing a beautiful pink and white kimono. She quickly shut the door behind her and gave him a demure little smile. "Good evening Naruto-kun."

Naruto was suddenly very aware that he was wearing nothing but a flimsy tee shirt and his boxers. "Hinata-chan, what are you doing here so late?" He noticed how she was dressed and also that she had put her hair up, he even noticed that she had the fragrance of lilacs. "Wow, you look beautiful."

She smiled at him. "Arigato Naruto-kun." She seemed to glide across the floor to stand in front of him. Her pretty lavender eyes were looking up into his.

He began to feel his heart beating faster and his temperature rising. She was standing so close to him. "Hinata-chan, what are you doing here?"

She got up on her toes and leaned up to kiss him. When she settled back down on her heels she began to slowly undo her kimono. "I want to stay here with you tonight."

He dry swallowed and his heart began to beat faster still. "I... I thought you wanted to wait to... you know."

"I did." She replied calmly. "But I don't anymore. After everything that's happened and knowing what may be coming I've decided I don't want to wait any more. I have loved you with my heart and soul, so I don't think it is wrong to love you with my body as well."

She let her kimono fall to the floor. There was nothing on underneath.

Naruto stared at her luscious body. She simply stood there without any shame calmly displaying herself to him. Her body was all smooth and inviting curves, her skin pale and creamy. She looked exactly how a woman should look. He couldn't help himself he put his hands on her and pulled her against himself.

"Your dad is going to kill me."

Hinata giggled. "No he won't Naruto-kun. I told him I wanted to stay at the Namikaze estate in order to help you with your duties as Hokage. I think he may suspect the truth but since we're already betrothed I don't think he would mind."

He nodded; feeling relieved to know Hiashi wouldn't come looking for him in the morning. Then he had a horrible thought. "What about my mom?"

Hinata smiled. "I explained to her what I had in mind. She'll assign me my own room where I'll keep my things until the wedding. But I'll be spending all my nights here with you."

Naruto paled, his lust momentarily forgotten. "You mean mom knows about..." he was too panicked to say it.

Hinata calmly nodded. "Naruto-kun she would know any way if we tried to keep it secret, you know she would." He could only nod and curse the phrase, 'protective surveillance' in his mind. "This way we don't need to worry."

"And she's ok with you and me being... you know?"

Hinata took both his hands and began guiding him to the bed. "She's fine with it." Hinata giggled. "You're all right with this too aren't you?" She gave him a naughty smile. "I mean if you'd rather wait..."

She squeaked as Naruto pulled them both down onto the bed.

---

Tsunade's funeral would be held two days after the rescue party's return. Naruto's coronation would be five days after that. Naruto was amazed at the sheer volume of things that had to be done. He did not dress in the formal robes, that would wait until the coronation. But in every other way he was already acting as Hokage. One of his first decisions was to send an invitation to every Kage of every nation big or small. He already had some ideas about some radical changes in Konoha's foreign policy.

He was pleased to learn that Mist and Lightning had accepted his invitation and would be sending their Kage's to his coronation as would Sand and most of the minor powers. Earth and Rain countries were the only significant refusals.

Along with trying to improve ties with foreign countries he tried to meet privately with some of the council members and see if he could win some of them over.

---

Shizune knocked on the library door. "Come in." Naruto called out."

Shizune entered to see about a dozen Naruto's sitting along a table making notes and going over various books and scrolls. "Naruto, what are you doing?"

Shizune had been heart broken to learn of Tsunade's death. Naruto had wanted to tell her the truth of what happened, but was too ashamed to. Though she was hurting she offered to stay on and act as his assistant as she had for Tsunade. Naruto immediately and gratefully accepted her help.

One of the Naruto's, the original, looked up at her in surprise. "What's wrong? I sent five clones to take care of all the paper work. If there were an emergency one of them would have dispelled to let me know."

Shizune frowned at him. "That's just it Naruto! You're letting clones take care of your duties."

He looked at her obviously not seeing the problem. "So?"

She shook her head. "So most people don't like the idea of the *real* Hokage not being present to dispense his duties."

"Aunt Shizune it's just paper work. All my clones are doing right now is signing and stamping a bunch of papers. What I'm doing here is much more important."

She looked at the impressive display that was all over the table. "Just what exactly are you doing?"

"I'm working on some new jutsus and new seals. I have a couple interesting ideas for variations on the Hiraishin."

That seemed to impress her. "You're creating new versions of that jutsu?"

He nodded. "Yeah, and one other thing too. A special jutsu for a particular ninja I know."

She shook her head. "Naruto, I'm sure what you're working on will be impressive. But you need to work on it in your free time. Your duties as Hokage have to come first."

He sent her a serious look. "They **do** come first aunt Shizune. Everything I am working on here is vital to my future plans to protect Konoha. Trust me, I am doing the village a lot more good here than I would be just sitting at my desk signing and stamping papers."

"What about your other duties like assigning missions and meeting with clients and important diplomats and ninja?"

"My clones can handle assigning missions just fine." He saw her frown. "They can. I'll still meet with clients and other people in person as I know some of them would take it as an insult to talk to a clone."

And of course any real emergency that comes up I'll immediately Hiraishin to the tower and take care of it. How is that?"

She frowned but nodded. "It would be better if you were there in person the full time, but as long as all the work gets done I suppose it will be all right."

---

The whole village seemed to attend the funeral of the Lady Tsunade. It was a day of mourning and no business would be conducted. Bells tolled mournfully through the day. Before her memorial a long line of mourners came to pay respect and lay down a flower before a picture of her smiling face.

---

Jiraiya put down a flower. *I always loved you Tsunade, even when you were damn near killing me. I'm sorry we never got together. In my whole life there were only ever two men I was ever jealous of. Orochimaru because he was the genius and the old man's favorite. And Dan, because he had your love. I hope that where ever you are now you're at peace and that Dan, Nawaki, and the old man are all there to keep you company. Goodbye Tsunade, I love you.*

---

Kushina placed a flower down.

*I owe you more than I can ever repay you. You gave me back my son. Thank you my dearest friend. I will honor you for the rest of my life. Rest in peace.*

---

Naruto placed down a flower and stood there looking at her image.

*I miss you so much godmother. I would give up everything if you could be here now. I never wanted to be Hokage like this. I always wanted you to be there helping me. I'm so sorry for what I did. I know it was my fault and I know I can **never** make up for it. But I swear to you I will be the best Hokage I can be. I will give everything I have to*

*protect this village. I swear I will make you proud of me. I won't let the sacrifice you made for me be for nothing. That's a promise godmother. I love you.*

---

Five days later.

He stood before the mirror staring at his image.

"You look very handsome Naruto-kun." His mother spoke approvingly.

"Do you remember the first time I ever wore this?"

"Of course, it was your first day at the academy."

Naruto nodded and continued to look at his image in the mirror. He was wearing the white Hokage robes with the orange flames along the hem. The only thing missing was the hat. "I remember that day like it was yesterday. I remember Sasuke telling me I was a pretender."

"Sasuke was an idiot." Kushina said flatly. "Don't worry about what he thought or about what anyone else might think. You were never a pretender."

He smiled at his mother. "I wish dad were here to see this."

"So do I Naruto-kun. He would be very proud of you son."

---

"Naruto-kun you look so handsome!" Hinata said happily. She was waiting for him in the living room along with all the others who would be making the walk to the tower with him today.

All the people he had invited to attend the ceremony with him. Alysa-chan was in her favorite pink dress jumping about and eager. Haku was there smiling. There was Kakashi his niisan.

He leaned over and whispered to Hinata. "Kakashi's here actually on time. I think we should be careful, the world might be ending today!"

Hinata covered her mouth as she giggled.

Her father Hiashi was present as was Neji. Hanabi was there too as a favor to Hinata.

Lee was giving him the, 'good guy' pose and his teeth were blinding.

Shikamaru was there with his new fiancé standing close beside him. The Yamanka clan heir and new member of the council was standing a little ways off with her arm around Chouji's. Naruto was sad to see that old resentments hadn't gone away.

Gabrella and Tayuya were both talking to his mom. He really wasn't close to either girl; they were here at his mom's request.

All of his family were present of course. Grand uncle Saishu, uncle Shinzou and his wives including Anko.

There were Shizune and Jiraiya both talking. Yamato was standing off a bit and chatting with Saishu.

Kiba was trying to approach Tayuya without much success.

Naruto couldn't help but smile at all the precious people he had in his life now. He wanted to protect them and their happiness.

"You ready to go son?" Kushina asked.

He reached out and took Hinata's hand. "Yeah mom, let's go."

---

There were no glares as they all walked along the street. There were cheers and looks of respect. Naruto couldn't help but wonder if that was because he was Hokage now or because of who was traveling with him. Regardless it felt good.

---



On New Year 's Day three years before he had stood atop the tower and listened to the cheers as his godmother became the Godaime Hokage.

Now he stood there looking out onto a sea of faces. All of them looking up at him.

*This is what I have dreamed of my whole life. But I would give it up if you were here now godmother.*

He slowly placed the hat upon his head and spoke in a loud clear voice that carried down to the plaza below.

"From this day forward I shall protect and guard the village of Konoha. For I am the Rokudaime Hokage."

There was a moment of silence as his words echoed through the plaza.

And then it came. In one voice a thunderous cheer greeted him. It was the same wall of sound he remembered from three years before. He shut his eyes and let their cries of approval and joy wash over him.

He had done it. He had achieved his lifelong ambition.

Now the hard part started.

# Welcome to Konoha

He really enjoyed hearing their cheers as he stood atop the tower. He also liked finally getting to wear the hat. The hat was cool. When the cheers finally ended he turned around to receive congratulations from all the people he'd invited. His mom hugged him and gave him a kiss on the cheek. Hinata followed that with a sweet kiss on his lips. He picked up an indignant Alysia and let her ride on the Hokage's shoulders as people laughed.

There was a huge feast being held in the Tower to celebrate his coronation as Hokage. He would have really liked to have stayed and enjoyed the good food and company. But as he was already discovering the duties of the Hokage demanded a lot of his time. He stayed for five minutes before slipping out with Jiraiya coming with him to a different room in the tower.

---

He stared down at the plans. He went over the numbers again. He was sure it would work. The jutsus he would need were already written down in various scrolls. There were no ways to test his theories of course. But he had faith that it would work. His will and his vision had brought him to this point. He would not stop now. He would make his dream come true no matter the cost.

He heard familiar footsteps approaching. He did not need to look up.

"What is it?" Pein asked.

His partner approached his side before answering. She stood there patiently in her black robes with red clouds and with a paper flower in her hair. "It is definitely confirmed now."

Pein finally looked up from his drawings. "Is it?"

Konan nodded. "Namikaze Naruto is definitely alive. What is more, he has been proclaimed the Sixth Hokage of Konoha."

"What of the Fifth?" Pein asked curiously.

"She is reported to have died during his rescue. No one seems to know the details of her death. The public is however aware that Naruto no longer possesses the Kyuubi."

"Hmmm, that's very interesting considering that when we left Tsunade was alive and Naruto was dead." Shrugging he turned back to his drawings. "Well it may be interesting but it's not really important."

"You don't think this is important?" Konan asked.

"No." Pein replied without looking up again.

"Konoha's new leader has a real reason to hate us. Isn't that deserving of at least a little concern?"

"Naruto was no match for Itachi even with the Kyuubi. What threat can he be now? The forces of Konoha could be a problem, but by the time he even figures out what the true danger is it will be too late. He is inexperienced and weak. He is far less of a threat to us as Hokage than Tsunade or Jiraiya would be."

Konan paused for a bit. "Pein?"

"Yes?"

She had known him her entire life. Without him she would have died long ago. She was devoted to him and to his dream. But she was perhaps the only one he might listen to. "Are you sure that it will work with only eight?"

He looked up at her in surprise. "Of course."

"You once told me that possessing the power of all nine biju was the key to controlling their immense chakra."

"The one tail is gone; I can do nothing about that. But have no fear I have carefully compensated the jutsus to make up for the loss. The weapon **will** work Konan, trust in me."

She looked at him with deep concern. "You know that I trust you, I always have. But... but what if you are wrong?"

"I am not." He said calmly. He put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Konan you know how long this has been my dream. Since we lost everything as kids I have burned with a desire to make people, all people, understand the futility of war. And the only way to do that is to make war too terrible to be fought any longer. And I will make it happen." He gave her a comforting smile. "We have come too far to stop now. I will make this work and I will bring peace to this world the only way possible; with the sword. Trust in me."

She slowly nodded. "I trust in you Pein, always."

He smiled and nodded back in appreciation. "Thank you."

She soon left and he was alone again staring at his drawings.

"Five down, three to go." He muttered to himself.

---

Naruto had spent two dull hours greeting important dignitaries who had come to attend his coronation. There were foreign lords from almost every land. Not to mention the Fire Daimyo and his wife (and their little cat too.) There were also a dozen Kages from ninja villages great and small. He made time to greet and speak to each and every one of them. As he did so he was careful to keep Jiraiya and Shizune close at hand. Jiraiya being a living legend overawed many of his guests. Whereas Shizune knew many useful facts about each Kage and helped him deal with them while appearing to know a great deal about them.

He would have dearly liked to have spent his time celebrating with his family and friends. But he didn't dare use a clone for this. At least he had left a clone back at the party so he would at least have the memories of it later. After a couple hours of playing host Shizune mercifully informed him he could safely leave without offending anyone. But even then his work was not done. He had arranged for some private meetings in his office.

---

He was sitting in the chair that had been his godmother's not very long ago. It was his chair now. His desk, his office, his position. It was already night time and from the window he could see multicolored explosions of light in the darkened sky. He sighed. Right now his clone was likely on the roof with his arms wrapped around Hinata as they all watched. That was where he wanted to be now, but his duty required him to be here instead.

The door to his office opened and he rose to his feet with a friendly smile as an old man in blue and white robes entered.

"Kazekage-san," Naruto offered him a bow. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

Sulamon was careful to return the bow. "It is I who thank you Hokage-san, for the honor you have shown me." Sulamon was painfully aware that Suna was no longer one of the great powers. Yet Naruto had shown him the courtesy due one of the great Kages. The respect was greatly appreciated. Naruto motioned for him to sit in the chair in front of the desk and so he did so. "What did you wish to speak of Hokage-san?"

Naruto sat back down in his own chair. "I have had some thoughts about some rather radical changes to the foreign policy of my village. To begin with I want to make some changes to the treaty that ended the war."

Sulamon eyed him warily. This might be bad. If Konoha wanted another pound of flesh there was nothing Suna could do but submit.

Fighting Konoha again was out of the question. "What sort of changes?" The Kazekage asked neutrally.

Naruto took out a piece of paper and placed it on his desk. "According to the terms of surrender you must pay reparations of 20 million ryu each year for the next ten years. Your ninja are not permitted to perform any missions outside of the Land of Wind and you are not permitted to sign any treaties with foreign powers without the permission of Konoha. You have also provided us with hostages. I believe that covers everything."

The Kazekage nodded. "Yes those are the terms we agreed to when we made peace."

"I want to change them." Naruto said flatly and handed over another piece of paper. "This is what I have in mind to replace them with."

Sulamon took the paper anxiously and read it. What he read shocked him and he actually read it again to be sure he had not somehow misunderstood. He looked at the Hokage with real surprise. "Why in kami's name would you want this? This releases us from the conditions of the peace treaty and gives us a chance to become great again one day." He looked at Naruto suspiciously. "What is in it for you?"

"I want our villages to be allies." Naruto replied.

"We already are."

"No we're not." Naruto said. "It's not a real alliance if you're compelled to it at the end of a sword. The way things are now you will continue to hate us and wait for a day when you can get revenge. You'll be our allies only as long as you know we are too strong for you to fight. If that should change one day you will attack us without a second thought."

Sulamon slowly nodded, he would give Naruto some credit and talk to him honestly, as one leader to another. "That is so; it is the way of

the world for the strong to take advantage of the weak. Had we won the war we would not have treated you gently."

Naruto shook his head. "But all that leads to is an unending cycle of war and revenge. How can there ever be real peace when one side is always wanting revenge?"

"What would you suggest instead?" Sulamon asked.

"A Grand Alliance where all member villages are equals and all members are guaranteed security from attack. I want an alliance where we can foster friendship between the villages and resort to war only in defense from outside attack."

"Friendship?" Sulamon could not believe what he was hearing. "You expect the villages to become *friends* ?"

"Eventually, yes."

Sulamon stared at him. "Are you really so naïve as to believe that is even remotely possible?"

Naruto shrugged. "Maybe it's a revolutionary idea, but I believe it's the only way to have real peace someday."

Sulamon eyed him carefully. "You did more than any other single ninja to defeat my village in the war. You killed my predecessor and hundreds of other ninja. After all that how can you even want real friendship with us?"

"Alysa is your granddaughter I believe?"

Sulamon nodded. "She is."

"Well I have come to care for her as my imouto. I have a friend named Haku who was a mist nin. He very nearly killed the girl I love and I nearly killed him. But now I consider him one of my closest and dearest friends. So I happen to know for a fact that those who are

enemies can become friends one day. And if I have to choose I will put my faith in friendship over the sword."

"Interesting sentiment for a ninja, especially for a Kage."

Naruto actually smiled at that. "Well one thing I've never been called is ordinary."

For the first time a grin appeared on the Kazekage's lips. "I believe that, I also believe that you never will be. Well whatever the case, I am ready to sign your treaty."

"That's great, but before you do there's one more thing we need to discuss first."

"What is that?"

"It's about Alysia and the other hostages."

---

"See he signed it!" Naruto showed off the signature with great pride.

Jiraiya and Shizune both looked at it.

"Kid," Jiraiya spoke. "There was never any doubt that he would. From his point of view he only gains."

"Well I am very proud of you Naruto!" Shizune said. "I think it's wonderful that you are trying to make a lasting peace."

Jiraiya frowned, obviously not so sure. "Kid this idea of yours; you know it'll never work right?"

Naruto leaned back in his seat. "Maybe it will and maybe it won't. But I have to create a world of peace right? What other choice is there?"

Jiraiya shrugged. "Well you could always try and make Konoha so strong no one would ever dare challenge her."



"You mean the Akatsuki method?" Naruto frowned. "No, I'm not going to try and conquer the world or scare everyone into doing what I want. I won't be like *them*. If I do end up leading Konoha into a war it will be to create a greater peace, not just to get power or revenge."

Jiraiya looked at his student. Naruto really believed it, and damn if he couldn't make you believe it too. Jiraiya smiled. "Well kid seeing as there are only two possibilities I'll give you my full support to try and make this thing real." He chuckled. "You know you're going to have a real fun time explaining all this to the council."

Naruto just shrugged. "It has to be done. I have enough support, I'm sure I'll manage."

Shizune looked to the clock on the wall. "It is time for your next meeting."

Naruto nodded. This would be a long night.

---

The Otokage smiled. "The Grand Alliance huh? Well sure I'll sign." Suigetsu spoke happily and smiled with all those sharp teeth. After two years fighting he had finally secured the position of Otokage and control of the Sound village. "To be honest I was surprised to get your invitation to come. I'd be happy to hook up with the strongest village around."

Naruto had disliked him immediately. Naruto saw an awful lot of Zabuza in the man. "Well that's great but there are certain conditions to joining."

"Like what?"

"First off no more human experiments. Second no more curse seals. And finally no more recruiting people from Fire country." Naruto answered stiffly.

Suigetsu nodded. "Sure, all that stuff was Orochimaru's doing. He actually experimented on me so I got no taste for doing it myself. We don't even have info on the curse seal anymore. (Naruto knew that to be true from his previous mission, but didn't want to leave Suigetsu any wiggle room on the subject.) And we'll stop grabbing kids from Fire country." Suigetsu's smile widened. "We'll be good little boys and girls."

Naruto did not trust him. But if he kept his bargain, he would be treated like any of the members of the alliance. "Welcome aboard then."

---

The Raikage looked at the piece of paper with a slight grin. "You are serious about this?"

Naruto nodded. "I sure am. I already have four signatures as you can see."

The Raikage shook his head and handed the paper back to him. "You have acquired four weak villages that will be nothing more than a burden to you. Kumogakure is a great power and in need of no alliance." He shook his head. "This so called Grand Alliance of yours will not come to anything."

"Well I think great things will come from it."

The Raikage shrugged, not seeing it as important enough to argue about. "Well my village has no interest in it. Now was there anything else you wished to discuss?"

Naruto slowly nodded. "As a matter of fact there is. I wanted to talk about the two tails jinchuuriki, Nii Yugito."

The Raikage frowned. "What about her?" He asked warily.

"She will undoubtedly be targeted by the Akatsuki for extraction, just as I was. You should make every effort to protect her."

Naruto was surprised to see the man shake his head. "She is a ninja of the village hidden in the clouds. She is expected to face danger. I will certainly not coddle her as though she were a helpless child."

"Every ninja is expected to face danger." Naruto agreed. "Not every ninja is expected to face the likes of Uchiha Itachi and other S-rank criminals."

"She will survive or she will not but I will not waste resources on her."

Naruto saw a look that he was quite familiar with. "You hate her don't you?" He asked quietly. "She's nothing but a tool to you, and a dangerous one at that. You'd probably be just as happy if she were killed."

The Raikage sent him a sharp look. "Do not presume to judge me, you have been Hokage for but a day."

"She is one of your own people. How can you not care about her?"

"Not every village is as soft as Konoha. Casualties are to be expected." The Raikage said simply.

Naruto frowned. He could not imagine Sarutobi or his godmother ever being so dismissive about someone's survival. He was absolutely certain that Akatsuki would be coming for her. He was also sure that if special steps were not taken she would die. Though he had never met her he felt a kinship for her as someone who had been a jinchuuriki. There was also the more practical matter of needing to foil Akatsuki.

"I have an idea..."

---

Naruto remained at the tower until well past midnight.

---

The next morning Haku was strolling down the hallway towards the stairs as the door to Naruto's room opened. Out stepped a fully dressed Naruto and Hinata in a robe.

"Good morning Naruto, good morning Hinata-chan." Haku called pleasantly. He knew that Hinata had moved in. He was a bit surprised though to see her coming out of his room.

"Morning Haku." Naruto said.

"Good morning," Hinata said brightly. She leaned over and shared a quick kiss with Naruto. "I need to change then I'll meet you downstairs for breakfast." She hurried over to her room which was right next to Naruto's

Haku stood there patiently with his friend as they both waited for her. "You have a huge smile on your face Naruto."

Naruto chuckled a bit. "Well can you blame me? When I wake up the very first thing I see is my Hinata-chan."

Haku nodded, feeling a bit sad that he had yet to have that experience with Gabrella. "You're very lucky."

Naruto nodded. A thought then occurred. "Hey Haku, remember when you asked me what I would do if the only way I could marry Hinata would be to join the Hyuga clan?"

Haku nodded. "Of course, you told me that you would not marry her."

Naruto had one of his huge smiles. "Well I take it back. I know now that I love her too much to ever be without her."

"So you would marry her even if it meant joining her clan?" Haku asked carefully.

"Yeah, I would. Because being with her is worth that sacrifice."

"But what about your children? Would you want them to be raised in the Hyuga clan with all their rules and stiff behavior?"

Naruto frowned a bit. He loved Hinata dearly, and had great respect for Hiashi and Neji. But having spent so much time with that clan growing up he knew the problems with them. They cared too much for tradition and were rigid and formal even behind closed doors. But even so Naruto nodded. "It wouldn't be my first choice. But even if they were, any child with Hinata for a mother would grow up being loved and shown affection."

"But what if something happened to her?" Haku asked seriously. "The way something happened to your father."

Naruto thought about that. "We are all in danger Haku. Death can come for any of us at any time." That was something he really **knew**. "But if I were going to lose my Hinata-chan then I would want to spend every minute with her that I could. And once she was gone I would love and take care of my children and make sure they knew just how much I loved them."

Haku listened to his friend's answer and could not think of anything to add.

A couple minutes later Hinata came out of her room dressed and ready. She took Naruto's hand and together the three of them went down stairs to get breakfast.

---

"Kaasan, could you and Alysa stop by the tower at noon today? There is something I want to take care of and then we can all have lunch."

His mother smiled knowing what her son had in mind. She looked over to the little girl. "Would you like that Alysa-chan?"

The girl nodded eagerly. "Hai kaasan!"

---

When noon rolled around Kushina and Alysa were ushered into the Hokage's office. When they entered both Naruto and the Kazekage stood to greet them.

"Hello Alysa," Sulamon greeted his granddaughter politely with a small grin.

"Ojii!" Alysa said happily and hurried over to him. He bent down and gave the girl a small hug.

"Have you been well treated Alysa?"

The girl nodded her head up and down. "Oh yes grandfather!" She smiled over at Kushina and Naruto. They don't treat me as a hostage but like family. She is my mother and he is my big brother."

Her birth mother had died when she was two. Her father had been killed fighting in Rain country when she was four. She had been raised by an aunt and uncle after that surrounded by the couple's children. She was never alone and she was not unloved. But whether by purpose or not she was never as close to her aunt and uncle as their birth children were. So when she had come to Konoha she had been very happy to have Kushina treat her like daughter.

"Imouto," Naruto spoke up. "You are here today because I have decided to release the hostages from Suna."

She sent her niisan a look of fear and deep hurt. "You're sending me away?" She ran from her grandfather back to Kushina and grabbed on to her. "Please mother! I want to stay here with you and everyone else!"

Kushina quickly gave her daughter a comforting hug. "No one is sending you away dear."

"That's right." Naruto came out from behind his desk. She hadn't given him a chance to finish what he was saying. "What I was going to tell you was that you could return to Suna *or* you could stay here

and be adopted into the family." Naruto gave his imouto a warm smile. "You won't be our guest anymore, but you will legally be my sister, Namikaze Alysa."

"Really?" She looked up between her mother and brother. "I'll really be in the family?"

"Honey, you are already family to us." Kushina said as she rubbed her daughter's back. "This will just make official what has been true for a long time now."

Naruto grinned. "Well that's if you want to stay here with us."

"Yes! Yes, I do! More than anything niisan I want to stay here with you and kaasan."

"Then that is what will happen." Kushina said and hugged her tight.

---

"No." Temari said firmly.

Sulamon frowned. "Temari you have a responsibility to both your clan and village."

She held up her left hand to display for him a diamond ring. "I also have one to my future husband. I was willing to sacrifice *everything* for Suna. But now I have new loyalties. I love Shikamaru and Yoshino, I am not leaving them. Konoha is home now." She spoke firmly.

Sulamon shook his head sadly. "This is the end of the Sabaku line. Can you live with that?"

She nodded without hesitation. "After all the misery the Sabaku name has caused I am glad to let it vanish forever."

---

At six that evening Naruto had called for another meeting of the Council. There he presented to them a fait accompli. He had a treaty with the signatures of the Kages of Sand, Grass, Waterfall, Sound, Star, River, and Tea. He also presented them with a pair of chests each filled with a hundred million ryu. (Along with the Shodai's necklace the scroll with the chests had been in Naruto's possession the entire time.)

"So, with the two hundred million ryu that was retrieved on the mission to Torikae the village will not lose any income from releasing Suna from her obligations. Now instead of a vengeful Suna we have a willing ally. Suna along with the other six villages that have agreed to join us are the beginning of what I hope will eventually be an alliance that will include every last ninja village."

Naruto sat back down very pleased with all he had accomplished so quickly.

He had no sooner sat then Danzo was on his feet furious. "Are you insane?!" He demanded.

"Watch your mouth!" Kushina barked.

"You release Suna from her obligations and give her free reign to become a threat again?"

"I'm giving them the chance to become a strong friend to us." Naruto said calmly. He sort of wished Jiraiya was there to intimidate them a little. But he had already left to gather information. "They were the first to join the Grand Alliance."

"Grand Alliance?" Danzo openly mocked. "All you have done is committed us to defend six weaklings should they be attacked. Where is the advantage to Konoha? How does this strengthen us?"

"We are already acknowledged the strongest of all the ninja villages. And unlike you Danzo I believe that having friends in this world will only make us stronger."



"Friends?" Danzo curled his lip in open contempt. "There is no such thing among the ninjas of different villages. If you trust others they will only betray you one day. Just as Suna betrayed us."

Naruto shook his head. "Not if they have more to gain by being our friends. This alliance will guarantee their territory and give them security. I think it is our best chance for a lasting peace."

Danzo continued to argue bitterly against it but Naruto had too much support on the Council for there to be any doubt of the outcome. Especially with two hundred million ryo just sitting there on the table. Naruto kept a careful eye on Riyuki. He had expected Danzo's opposition. He had not expected the Uchiha clan head to quietly sit there and say nothing. The fact that he voted **for** approving the alliance was an even greater surprise.

The treaty was officially ratified by the Council and the Grand Alliance came into being.

---

Eight days later.

Shizune knocked on his door. She popped her head in. "She is here."

Naruto nodded. He'd expected her arrival today so he was actually in his office instead of his clones. "Send her in."

An attractive blonde kunoichi entered and bowed to him. She stood up and gave him a calm look. She wore her cloud hitai-ite around her forehead. "I am Nii Yugito of the village hidden within the clouds. I was ordered to report to you about a long term mission."

Naruto stood up and returned her bow. "I am very glad to meet you Yugito; I hope we can become good friends."

He saw her eyebrows quirk for just a second before the calm mask returned. She obviously didn't know what to make of the Hokage of

Konoha saying that to her. "Well, I suppose that is possible." She said neutrally. "Can you please inform me of who my client is and what the mission is?"

Naruto smiled. "I am your client. I gave the Raikage five million ryu of my family's money to hire you as a bodyguard for a full year."

She stared at him. "A year?"

"Welcome to Konoha."

## Test day

The following morning as he and Hinata went downstairs to eat Yugito was already there dressed and waiting

The following morning as he and Hinata went downstairs to eat Yugito was already there dressed and waiting. Naruto sent her a big and friendly smile.

"Good morning Yugito-chan." He said.

"Did you sleep well Yugito-chan?" Hinata asked.

She couldn't help but look at them both a bit curiously. She was a foreign ninja and a stranger and they were both calling her, 'chan' as though they were old friends. No one called her chan. Well it was all part of the job she supposed. After just one day this was obviously going to be a strange experience.

She screwed on a smile. "I slept well thank you. Good morning to you Hinata and to you Hokage-san."

Naruto sent her a playful frown. "Oh you're calling Hinata by just her name but not me?" He pretended to pout. "I feel left out."

Is he *really* a Kage? She wondered. The Raikage always demanded respect from those who served him. "Hokage-san, while I am here on this mission I am your obedient servant. To address you simply by name would be disrespectful."

He shook his head slightly but didn't try to argue with her. Even after all these years Haku *still* called his mom Kushina-sama. "I am very sorry about what happened last night. I should have warned you, I honestly didn't think you would be ambushed so quickly."

Mention of that embarrassed her. "That is quite all right Hokage-san. A ninja must be prepared at all times and I let my guard down."

"Well if it makes you feel any better everyone who lives here has been attacked like that. I myself have gone through it several times."

"Really?" Yugito said in surprise. He nodded.

Hinata gave her a warm smile. "If it helps I think you looked very nice in braids and pink ribbon."

---

She found breakfast to be incredibly uncomfortable and difficult to deal with. That was not because the food was bad, it was excellent and hot. It was not because people were staring at her and making snide comments, that she was used to. It was not even because she was being ignored and treated as though she didn't exist, that she was also used to. No, what made breakfast so hard to deal with was that everyone was friendly and talked to her as an old friend rather than as hired help. It was a unique experience and not something she had expected.

It was a large and rather loud gathering as all the people who lived there sat around a big table and talked and laughed as they ate. She found it hard to believe that Kushina, the Hokage's mother and the actual Namikaze clan head, insisted on doing the cooking. In her experience clan heads did *not* do that. She wondered if this was how all the clans in Konoha were or if this was simply an eccentric family.

She saw her nemesis skip into the dining room and flash her a very big smile. Yugito couldn't help but send the little eleven year old a genuine smile back. Despite the horrors of last night you could not stay angry at the little girl. As she watched Alysa skipped over to where the Hokage was sitting and gave him a big hug.

"Niisan, there's something I want to ask you." Alysa spoke up.

"Yes Alysa-chan?"

"Can I be a ninja?"

As though drawn by a magnet Kushina came out of the kitchen and spoke before her son had a chance to. "Alysa! You want to be a kunoichi?" Her little daughter nodded. "I thought you wanted to be a hair dresser."

"Well kaasan that was when I was a hostage and I wasn't allowed to be a ninja or use weapons. Now that I'm a part of the family I want to be a ninja like you and niisan and everyone else."

Kushina did not look happy at this news.

Anko strolled in wearing nothing but an oversized shirt. "Well that's great. I'll be happy to help you."

"You stay out of this." Kushina snapped.

Alysa looked up at her mother in surprise. "Is there something wrong kaasan?"

Kushina smiled down at the girl. "Alysa honey, you don't have to be a ninja to a part of this family. We will love you just as much whether you are one or not."

"I know that mother." Alysa replied. "But I really want to be a ninja like you and niisan. I want to go on missions with my team and see new places, and protect the village just like you do."

Kushina slowly nodded, but looked disappointed. In her life she had been a part of two ninja clans and through the years had lost many of the people she loved. She had attended her husband's funeral and the funerals of many of her kin. Not long ago she had looked down at her son's lifeless body and then seen her close friend die in front of her. She did not want Alysa becoming a ninja as well. "Honey being a ninja is very, very dangerous. You know that the Lady Tsunade died not too long ago. All of us who are ninja live dangerous lives and can die at any time. Are you sure you wouldn't be happier being a hair dresser or maybe a teacher?"

Alysa crossed her arms and shook her head. "No mother, I want to be ninja. I know that it's dangerous, but that is what makes you all so brave." She looked about the room. Most everyone was present and they were nearly all ninja or retired ninja. "You protect others and provide for the village. You face dangers and challenges and have lives filled with adventure. That's what I want! I want to live an amazing life. I would never be happy just staying here my whole life while others were doing really important things." She gave her mother a serious look. "I want to be just like you and my big brother."

Kushina saw that Alysa really meant it. She let out a sigh and nodded. "All right honey, if it's what you truly want."

"Alysa-chan," Naruto asked. "You're eleven, which means you've missed out on three years of the academy. Would you like to enroll for one year? If you do that you'll have to pass an entrance test to make sure you know everything a fourth year student should."

Alysa looked a bit surprised but excited by the prospect. "I'd like that. What do I need to know?"

"You'll need to be able to mold chakra, have basic taijutsu, some weapons skills with shuriken and kunai, know math, codes, the rules of shinobi conduct, science, history, and be able to pass a physical endurance test." Naruto stated.

She looked a little worried at the length of his list. "That sounds like a lot. How long do I have to learn all that?"

"Until the beginning of September." Kushina answered. "So since it's May now you have a little less than four months." She saw her daughter look a bit panicked. "It's not as bad as it sounds."

"That's right Alysa-chan." Hinata spoke. "The academy requirements are not *that* high. I am sure if you work hard that you can reach your goal."

Haku nodded and spoke as well. "You've already received an excellent education so the academics should be no problem for you."

"But that still leaves molding chakra and weapons and endurance." Alysa said. She quickly turned to her mother and brother. "Will you teach me?"

"Of course we will," Kushina answered. "But you have to remember Alysa that Naruto and I have other duties as well. We will give you training when we can." Alysa looked crushed. "But I think everyone here will be happy to help you." There were nods all around.

Yugito suddenly caught herself, she'd been nodding to. *What is wrong with me? Training this little girl is no part of my mission!*

Shinzou said. "That's right. Kushina, Naruto, Hinata, Haku, and Anko are all active duty ninja and have responsibilities. But uncle and I are both retired. We'll both be happy to give you plenty of training and the others will too when they can."

Naruto grinned to see how happy Alysa was. Over the years of course she had watched as people trained around her, but she had never done it herself. He chuckled knowing his little sister was in for quite an experience. *Well on the bright side after more than three months of Uzumaki training methods the academy will be a breeze for her like it was for me.*

---

After breakfast Kushina and Haku went off to train. Hinata went to the hospital to work as a medic nin. Anko left for her own duties while Shinzou and Saishu began teaching Alysa the basics. Naruto meanwhile created five shadow clones and sent them off to the tower. They were dressed in the Hokage robes and hat. As soon as they were gone the original removed his robes to reveal the black and red bodysuit beneath. He and Yugito headed not to the tower but to one of the training grounds.

---

"Why are we at a training ground Hokage-san?" Yugito asked.

"Well there's something I've been putting off that I really need to do." He looked at her. "You know that I was the jinchuuriki of the Kyuubi?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"Are you also aware that I no longer am?" She again nodded. "Well, after having spent my entire life as a demon container having the Kyuubi taken out of me has definitely been both a blessing and a curse. I no longer have to worry about losing control of it if I get too angry and people in general seem easier to deal with now. But the downside is I've lost not only a **lot** of chakra capacity but also powerful abilities including an ultimate defense." Losing the red chakra cloak and the red chakra clones was definitely a major change. "I need to see exactly how much strength I've lost and how much I still have."

He took out a scroll. With a puff of smoke it became several mats, each containing dozens of kunai. Taking one he carefully tossed it to Yugito. "There, that one is for you. Please keep it on you at all times."

She caught the kunai and looked closely at it. It three prongs and formula carved into the handle. She suddenly gasped as she recognized what it was. "Is this one of the tri kunai the Yellow Flash used with his famous jutsu?"

"That's right." Naruto answered. He tossing the rest of the kunai out into the training ground at random. "I was able to relearn my father's prized jutsu. So long as you have that with you I can reach you at any time no matter where you are."

She held the tri kunai in both hands as though it were a sleeping cobra. "While I appreciate this Hokage-san, I must tell you that even though I am in your employ as a Cloud nin I am honor bound to pass this formula on to my village."



"Here," he tossed her a second kunai. "You can send that to your Raikage with my compliments."

She stared at him as he continued to throw out more tri kunai. "Can you really be so cavalier about the secrets of so powerful a jutsu?"

He suddenly stopped and began laughing. He turned around to look at her. "If it were that easy every ninja from here to Iwa would know the Hiraishin. The formula you see there is maybe 1 percent of the jutsu. Knowing it is worthless if you don't have the other 99 percent." He gave her an embarrassed grin and rubbed the back of his head. "I am the only one to have ever figured out how to use my father's jutsu. Even that supposed genius Orochimaru could never solve it. I studied it for years, since I was an academy student. Then over a two and half year period I studied it for a few hours every single night until I was *finally* able to solve it. So I'm really not worried about anyone getting that formula."

She watched as he tossed out the rest of the tri kunai. Then he disappeared in a yellow flash. When he reappeared just a few seconds later he was holding all the tri kunai in his arms.

Her face remained vacant while inside she felt a whole new respect for him. Upon meeting him he'd kept on smiling and making jokes and trying to make her feel comfortable. He did **not** behave like a Kage in her opinion. She had begun wondering if he'd been made Hokage simply because he was the yellow flash's son. But he really could work the Hiraishin. *Anyone who can master that jutsu really must be a genius. Maybe there's more to him than meets the eye. I need to remember to look underneath the underneath.*

---

Throughout the morning he practiced various jutsus. Most of them were wind based she noticed, but he used a few of all the elements. He certainly had a very wide range of them. After making a river of earth flow past he frowned and stood there a while.

"Is something wrong?" Yugito asked politely.

"I'm not as strong as I used to be." He said quietly. "My wind jutsus are still not too bad. But my earth, fire, and water jutsus are a lot weaker than they used to be." He had used no lightning jutsus.

She looked at him in surprise. "They certainly seem powerful enough to me."

"You're just trying to be nice." He said dismissively.

"No," Yugito said flatly. "I never do that, not even for my employers or captains."

Naruto sighed. "Well, there is one tiny upside. My chakra control has gotten way better." He stood there for a moment and seemed to think about something. "Hmmm, I wonder."

He held out his right hand and balled it into a fist. Instantly it was surrounded by chakra. He slammed his fist into the ground. The earth shook and she was actually forced to leap back as it felt like an earth quake. When the shaking passed she was stunned to see a crater about twenty yards deep and about thirty yards wide. She was a jinchuuriki but even she found that display of raw power impressive.

*Wow! What freakish strength! I would have hated to see what he could do with the Kyuubi.*

"Well that's not too bad." He muttered. "Maybe I'll have Hinata teach me some medical jutsus."

He held out an open palm and began to gather chakra into a sphere. He was not surprised to find that the rasengan was also less powerful than it used to be. He guessed he could make one a little stronger than Jiraiya's. He let the chakra go with out bothering with using a target. It was easy for him to judge just how much power one of his rasengans had. He came to a painful decision.

He would no longer use the Rasenshuriken except in life or death situations. He had finally mastered adding a wind element to the rasengan and succeeded in creating a jutsu so lethal it destroyed on a cellular level. If he hit someone with it that person was not only dead but probably unrecognizable. But there was a drawback, if he used it more than once a days it caused him severe pain and bodily harm that was slow to heal. When that had happened Jiraiaya had immediately told him to never use it again, not even in practice. Naruto had thought he would need it at some point, but now he wasn't so sure. With his healing power not what it was he didn't know how much damage the Rasenshuriken might do to him. It would be a last option for a life and death fight.

"Well that leaves me one more thing to test." He formed the oh so familiar hand signs. **"Kage Bushin no jutsu."**

She saw the air all around them fill with smoke. When it cleared she was surrounded by hundreds of Naruto's. The Naruto at the very center began shaking. She quickly caught him before he fell to the ground.

"Hokage-san are you all right?" Yugito asked.

He was huffing and did not seem able to stand at the moment. "Four hundred," he wheezed.

"Four hundred?" Yugito asked. "Is that how many shadow clones you made?"

He nodded as he continued to catch his breath. "This... is my limit."

Yugito nodded. "It's very impressive."

"No it's not." He replied. "I used to be able to make two thousand."

She looked at him. "Can anyone else in your village make even **half** this many?"

He looked at her in surprise. "No, but it's nothing compared to what I used to be able to do."

She nodded as she continued to hold him up. "Hai Hokage-san, you no longer have the Kyuubi's chakra. Which means you'll have to settle for just being the most powerful ninja in your village by miles instead of by hundreds of miles." She gave him a rather sharp look. "I can only guess what you were like before but from what I can see you are definitely still S-ranked and I doubt there are many ninjas out there that would have a chance against you. You are a powerful and respected ninja with a family who loves you and a village that honors you. If you really miss having a demon inside you lets trade. Give me your powers and your family and I'll gladly give you the Nibi."

Naruto looked up at her in surprise at the outburst.

She began to blush and nodded her head in apology. "Forgive me Hokage-san! That was disrespectful, I apologize."

Naruto slowly got his legs under him again and stood on his own. "That's all right. You know you can say whatever you like around me."

She shook her head. "No Hokage-san, it is not all right for me to speak in such a way either to my employer or to a Kage."

Naruto smiled at her. "It's ok Yugito-chan; I know I act like a baka at times. You're allowed to tell me so."

She stared at him. For such a powerful ninja who had to be genius he sounded like a naïve child a lot of the time.

The clones disappeared with a long series of pops. "Come on Yugito-chan lets get to the tower. I have a bunch of meetings this afternoon and if I'm late aunt Shizune will be mad."

Slowly nodding she followed him. "Hai Hokage-san."

## Different kisses

"How much do you know of the Akatsuki

"How much do you know of the Akatsuki?" Naruto asked her on the way to the tower.

"Never heard of them." Yugito replied.

That drew a surprised look. They had been actively seeking biju and jinchuuriki for some time now. He knew for a fact that Jiraiya had sent a warning to the cloud village more than two years ago. Obviously that information had not been shared with the person it most affected.

"Akatsuki is an elite criminal organization made up of S and A rank missing nins. Among their members we've confirmed Uchiha Itachi, Yakushi Kabuto, Deidara, Sasori, and before his execution Hoshigaki Kisame. We also know that their leader is an individual by the name of Pein. Unfortunately all we really know about him is that he is a former rain ninja powerful enough to easily defeat Itachi, which makes him rather scary."

"I've heard of Itachi, and the others except for Pein are all in the Bingo book. They sound like a very dangerous organization."

"Oh believe me they are. And their goal right now is to collect the chakra of all the world's biju." He paused for a moment to return the friendly greetings being offered him on the street. He wasn't sure if it was because he was Hokage or because it was now known he no longer possessed the Kyuubi, but the whole village had embraced him again. It was like it had been after the battle with Sound and Sand.

Yugito did not fail to notice the way people would wave to him or call out a greeting to have it returned by Naruto. In the village hidden

among the clouds no one below the rank of council member would have dared to do that.

"Were they the ones who attacked you?" She asked.

"That's right."

She was not stupid and could see where the path led. "You expect them to come after me eventually don't you?" She did not sound particularly worried.

"Yes, it's only a matter of time."

She shrugged. "Well whoever they send I'm sure I'll be able to handle it."

Naruto came to a stop bringing her up short. He turned to her. "I used to think the same damn thing. I was wrong." He got walking again and so did she.

"You're using me aren't you?" She asked quietly without any resentment. "The Akatsuki are your enemy and you know they'll come for me eventually."

He shook his head. "I am not using anyone. The enemy of my enemy is my friend." He sent her a big grin. "See? We really can be friends."

---

At the tower she remained patiently outside his office door as he conducted meetings and took care of business. Including one unexpected meeting.

---

Naruto was very careful to treat his guest with complete courtesy. He also kept a friendly and open smile on his face.

"I thank you for meeting with me today." Uchiha Riyuki spoke with an uncharacteristic grin.

"No problem at all." Naruto replied pleasantly. "I did attempt to meet with you prior to my coronation but somehow you were never available."

"Well unfortunately I was very busy." Riyuki explained.

"Every other council member made time to meet with me, even Danzo." Naruto pointed out in a cheerful way.

"Well I have made time now." Riyuki did not let his happy demeanor slip.

"And was there anything in particular you wanted to talk about?"

Riyuki nodded. "Essentially I wanted to inform you that due to the fundamental change that has taken place within you that I hope our relationship can be improved."

His smile took on some real humor. "By, 'fundamental change within me' I assume you mean the fact I don't have the Kyuubi anymore?" Naruto liked seeing the man look just a bit uncomfortable at the mention of the Kyuubi.

"Well... yes." Riyuki had hoped to avoid anything specific.

Naruto chuckled. "You can say Kyuubi; it won't offend me I promise you. Here, Kyuubi, Kyuubi, Kyuubi, see?"

Riyuki nodded, certain Naruto was mentioning the demon's name solely to annoy him. He nevertheless kept a firm hold on his light hearted expression. "Well, now that the *Kyuubi* is no longer in your possession I thought it would be good to inform you that the entire Uchiha clan is now firmly behind you and bears you absolutely no ill will."

Naruto lifted a single eyebrow. "So you had ill will for me before?"

Riyuki's smile slipped for just a second. Naruto had no trouble spotting the hostility that lay underneath. "Perhaps there were some negative feelings *before* you became Hokage. Now of course you have our loyal support. The Uchiha clan has always been the most powerful clan in Konoha and I merely wanted to assure you that you could trust in us."

Naruto carefully nodded and decided not to question the statement of the Uchiha clan being the most powerful. He preferred commenting on something else. "Of course I trust the Uchiha clan. Just as I trust every *loyal* clan in this village to obey my lawful orders." He let his smile sharpen just a bit. "Never mind the fact that three members of your clan have tried to kill me."

That actually caught Riyuki by surprise. Partly because bringing up such unpleasant facts was unusual for these sort of meetings, and partly for another reason. "Three? I am aware of the unfortunate events surrounding Itachi and Sasuke, who were both my nephews. I trust you will not hold the entire clan responsible for the actions of one man who murdered his own father, my brother, before betraying his village. Or one who went insane and attacked you after murdering his own girlfriend. Who is the third?"

"Their father, your brother, Fugaku. My mother has told me all about how he was demanding my death the day after I was born."

"Surely you cannot blame him for that! It was the day after the Kyuubi's attack and the Uchihis had suffered many losses. You must realize that what he proposed was entirely reasonable given the circumstances."

Naruto's smile vanished. "A lot of people in this village thought wanting to kill me when I was a helpless child was, 'reasonable.' So far as I am concerned there is *no* justification for killing a baby."

Their talk came to an immediate halt, smothered by an embarrassing silence.



Riyuki slowly stood. He carefully offered Naruto a very deep bow. "You are right of course Hokage-sama. There is no excuse for such a thing, and I apologize to you on behalf of my clan. This is not how I wished our meeting to go. Perhaps it would be best if I were to simply go?"

But Naruto stood up well, and gave the man a bow of his own. "No, Riyuki-san, that was rude of me to say and I apologize. Please sit and let us continue. Would you like some tea brought in?"

Riyuki sat down and they both drank some hot tea as they talked about pleasant and meaningless subjects for the next twenty minutes. This was essentially what the meeting was supposed to have been like. Just an opportunity to build good will without trying to talk about politics or anything too serious. Before the end of their talk though Naruto did bring up one particular subject.

"I think you should know that I intend to kill Itachi and Kabuto. Not because they are Akatsuki or because they attacked me, but because they betrayed their village."

Riyuki nodded. "I wish you the best of luck in killing Itachi especially. He murdered his father and his existence is a mark of shame to my clan."

Naruto nodded. "I am very glad you feel that way. So far as I am concerned anyone who betrays me or this village will get absolutely no mercy from me no matter what clan they might belong to. And that is a promise."

Riyuki smiled and nodded his agreement. The hidden message within those words was obvious, but he carefully pretended not to notice.

---

When Naruto returned home with Yugito in tow he was greeted at the door by his mother.

"There's dinner on the table honey."

"Thanks mom." He quickly removed the Hokage cloak and hat. Being the Hokage was great, but he also loved just coming home to be surrounded by the people who were family to him. He looked about as he headed for the kitchen. "Where's Alysa? I was expecting to hear all about her first day of training."

Kushina chuckled. "The poor dear was exhausted. She's already asleep in bed."

Naruto smiled. "Well I suppose I should have expected that. Uzumaki training techniques aren't exactly easy to endure."

"That's what makes them effective." Kushina said. "So how was work? Anything you can share?"

He stopped on the way to the kitchen and looked around to make sure no one else was near. Kushina was a bit surprised at her son's caution. "I had a meeting with Riyuki today." He said in a low voice.

"Did he threaten you or make demands about something?"

To her surprise Naruto shook his head. "No, he basically came to make nice and chat, sort of like the Fire Daimyo's wife likes to do. His message was, 'trust me.'"

Kushina was frowning instantly. "Do you trust him?"

"Not for a second." Naruto finally headed into the kitchen.

---

The following day Kushina took her squad out on a B-rank retrieval mission to Tea country. It was not too difficult and four days after leaving they returned to Konoha. Haku asked Gabrella to have dinner with him but she declined preferring to just head straight home.

Watching her leave Haku sighed. Things between them were getting more and more stressful as the days slipped past. They both knew about her deadline and the pressure was building. Nothing had changed, he loved her, and she loved him. She was determined to lead the Uchiha clan. He was determined to found a new clan with a spirit much like the Namikaze's. Sometimes the growing tension led to moments of just spontaneous and amazing sex as they both grabbed onto each other and refused to let go. Other times she could be cold and treat him almost like a stranger.

"If you're lost I think the way home is down that way." Tayuya helpfully pointed towards the Namikaze estates.

Haku looked over to his teammate and smiled. They were close and he really liked her a great deal. Over the years he learned enough about women to understand that she liked him as well, as perhaps more than a friend. Had he never Gabrella he might have cared for Tayuya in that way. As it was his heart was spoken for.

Kushina had already headed home so it was now just the two of them. "Would you like to get something to eat?"

Tayuya was surprised by the request; normally she only got invited if Gabrella or Kushina were there as well. She smiled. "You paying?"

"Sure."

"All right." She playfully put her arm around his.

---

They'd had a good meal that had even included a little sake. Haku usually didn't drink but when Tayuya ordered sake for herself she was able to guilt him into drinking so that she wasn't doing it alone. They laughed and talked about the mission and about the sights on the way there and back. That was one of the joys of being ninja, you got to see things and have new experiences.

When dinner was over Haku naturally offered to walk Tayuya back to her apartment. When they got there she had invited him to come up and talk for a bit more. She always invited him and he always no. Except for this time.

---

Sitting on her couch next to her he listened as she played her flute for him. The sad tune reminded him of home just as it always did. But now it was reminding him of Gabrella too. Reminding him that things were not as they should have been.

*When did I start connecting Gabrella to the tragedies in my life?* He didn't like that thought at all. They loved each other! Why wasn't that enough? It was enough for Naruto and Hinata. Then he thought about his own parents. They had loved each other too, and they had both loved him as well. Even after all this time he could remember being happy surrounded by his parents' love. But in the end their love had ended in tragedy because it had not been strong enough to withstand the forces of an uncaring world.

He suddenly felt a gentle hand touching his cheek and carefully turning his face towards Tayuya's. She had stopped playing and was sitting very close to him. "Where are you?" She asked in a whisper. "I see in your eyes that you're a million miles away. I want you right here."

She looked nervous and afraid. "I'm sorry I was just thinking."

She nodded. "You were thinking about sad things right?" he felt her other hand caress his other cheek. "You always think about sad things when I play for you."

"I'm sorry." He was feeling very warm. He thought it was the sake, but it might have been because she was so close to him.

"Don't be," she spoke softly. "I'm glad my music makes you *feel* even if the feeling is sadness. I am just very glad that you are here with me now." Her face moved forward just a little and her lips pressed

against his. She could feel his surprise; feel him stiffen for just a second. But then he relaxed and she could feel him return her kiss. He was kissing her back.

She shut her eyes and let herself be immersed by the pleasure of this feeling. He was kissing her and he could feel his pleasure flowing through him. She had never ever been so happy in her life.

He shut his eyes and kissed her. Her kiss was warm and sweet. It was comfort. He could just relax and give into the simple pleasure of her lips touching his. She tasted wonderful to him, though it was different than the way Gabrella tasted when he kissed her.

As soon as he thought of Gabrella he opened his eyes again and carefully pulled away from Tayuya. The moment was over.

He quickly got up from the couch. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't be here." He sounded guilty.

Tayuya nodded, she understood. He felt something for her, but not enough. "Haku my door will always be open for you. If you ever need me for *anything* at all just come by. I promise I will never shut you out or turn away from you." She looked into his eyes. " *Anything* you should ever want from me, just ask and I will give it to you gladly." She saw his face begin to blush and she was sure he understood just what she was offering.

"I have to go, I'm sorry." Haku left as quickly as he could.

---

If Kushina suspected she did not reveal a hint of it either to Haku or Gabrella. Their usual training session went about as well as it normally did. At the end of training Haku left quickly with Kushina. Gabrella was a bit disappointed as she had decided to have dinner with him if he had asked. She sighed and got ready to go back to the compound. Maybe dad would want to do some extra training with her today.

"You're a stupid bitch."

Gabrella froze, and slowly turned around to stare at Tayuya who was just standing there about ten feet away. " *What did you say to me?*"

"I called you a stupid bitch." Tayuya repeated. "The most amazing boy in the world loves you and you're ready to just walk away from him so you can rule over your brainless clan. So as far as I'm concerned that makes you one hell of a stupid bitch."

"Who the hell are you to judge me?!" She demanded. "What the hell would you know about being part of a family or of a clan? I have responsibilities that you know nothing about!"

"Yeah, you're f#&king right about that. I don't know s#&t about having a real family or about being an almighty Uchiha princess. I just know that if Haku cared about me even half as much as he cares about you I'd hold on to him and never let him go." With that the girl disappeared in a swirl of wind.

Gabrella was furious, and more than a little worried by what had just been said. She loved Haku, more than she had ever thought she could. He made her happy and the thought of being with him for always filled her with raw joy. But whether she liked it or not she had obligations that she could not ignore.

---

Haku was very surprised when Gabrella showed up at the mansion after their training session and asked to talk to him alone.

He brought her up to his room and was nervously preparing to hear an angry accusation about what he had done the previous night. But rather than start yelling at him Gabrella had put her arms around him and begun kissing him. He put his own arms around her and, though a bit confused, gladly returned her affection. As he kissed her Haku knew that this was right. In the moments when they were actually together there was no sadness or regret. Those thoughts only came in the long hours they spent apart.

Finally she pulled her lips from his. He looked down at her and could only smile. "What was that for?"

"You know I love you right?" Gabrella asked fearfully.

He looked at her in obvious surprise. "Of course, and I love you."

"Haku, even if things don't work out between us I need you to know it's not because I don't love you. If it were just you and me I would marry you tomorrow."

Haku nodded and kissed her. "I know that."

She squeezed him tight and pressed her face into his neck. After a moment she turned her face up to him and there was a naughty little smile there that he recognized. "Are the walls here pretty thick?" He could see she was beginning to undo her jacket.

He began to smile as his heart beat began to pickup. "Actually they're very thick. They're almost soundproof."

"Really?" Gabrella let her jacket fall to the floor as they began kissing and removing their clothes.

---

When Gabrella left a couple hours later Kushina was by the front door smiling at her. Being in a generous mood Kushina did not say anything as her student left. It was quite enough to have seen Gabrella blush as she fled.

## A little house cat

From a hidden alcove he looked out upon his village. It was raining of course, it was always raining. He loved his village. Even after all the war and death and misery he had been forced to endure he still loved it and its people. It was for them, the helpless ones, the innocents, the orphaned that he had struggled so hard and long, fought so bitterly to gain power. He hated war. All his fellow Akatsuki members, save Konan, would have been shocked to learn that but it was true. Rain country had been a battleground throughout the Third Great Ninja War. He had seen at first hand the brutality and pointlessness of war. It never solved anything, there was always another enemy, there was always more reason to fight. He wanted to show the world how pointless it was. He wanted to give the world, but especially his own people, the blessings of peace.

He was off to a good start. A year and a half ago he'd finally felt confident enough in his strength to make his move. He had killed the legendary Hanzo and supplanted him as ruler. Then he had killed all of Hanzo's family. He killed all of Hanzo's friends. He killed every last person who had ever worked with or supported Hanzo. He let them all know that a new age had begun and that there would be no going back to the old. He had finally brought peace to his village. With his power he watched over them like a benevolent god. No one saw him, no one knew where he resided, but they all knew he was real enough and they obeyed him without question. He nodded to himself, it was good, he was pleased with what he'd done here. He intended to give the blessings of his peace to the whole world.

Konan quietly approached him. He turned to face her. She was his one and only dear friend. She was also his messenger and to the people of the village hidden in the rain she was an angel. The one who brought the words of their hidden god down to the people.

"We may have a problem." Konan informed him directly.



"What sort of problem?" Pein inquired.

"It seems Naruto has hired Yugito to act as a bodyguard. She is in Konoha with him now under constant ANBU surveillance."

Pein was silent for a moment as he digested this information. "I see. Well, that will make things more interesting."

"What do you want to do about this?" Konan asked.

"Nothing." He shrugged. "For the time being we will leave the two tails be. We will concentrate on harvesting the other two first. The Nibi can wait, for now."

Konan nodded and left him.

He returned to looking out at the rain. *That was not a bad move Rokudaime Hokage, but all you can do is delay me for a bit. Nothing will stop me from giving this world peace.*

---

Naruto's first month as Hokage went by fairly smoothly. No unexpected crisis erupted, no major problems took place. During this time though a few interesting developments did occur.

---

"Naruto I need to ask a favor." Shikamaru said.

"I kind of guessed you did when you went to the trouble of coming here." They were in the Namikaze private library where Naruto and some clones were hard at work. "So what is it?"

"Temari wants you to marry us."

Naruto immediately chuckled. "I'm flattered, but I'm sure Hinata would object and I prefer you and Temari as just friends."

Shikamaru needed a second, then frowned. "You're being troublesome."

"Shikamaru, with you everything is troublesome."

"Look Naruto, since you're the Hokage now Temari really wants you to be the one to marry us."

"Well knowing Temari I'm guessing she's probably pretty adamant about it and you'll be in trouble if I don't agree." An evil look came into Naruto's eyes.

"Pretty much." Shikamaru did not like the way his friend was looking at him.

"You two are getting married on October first right?" Naruto had already gotten his wedding invitation.

"Yeah, it's the first available Saturday after I turn 16. It's the soonest I can marry her."

Naruto let out a melodramatic sigh. "I don't know Shikamaru. I mean performing a wedding? It sounds *awfully* troublesome." It was kind of funny seeing Shikamaru squirm a bit.

"Naruto, do you *want* her to kill me?" Shikamaru sounded just a little worried.

"Well..." he rubbed his chin trying to look thoughtful. "I suppose if my Chief Advisor were the one getting married then I really couldn't say no."

"Hey, I thought I was your best friend!"

"Actually Shika I still think of Hinata as my best friend."

Shikamaru took on a surly look. "I've told you before that I don't want the job. It's way too much responsibility."

"You would get to spend more time in the village." Naruto pointed out. "You wouldn't have very many troublesome missions."

"Being Chief Advisor would be troublesome. I'd have responsibilities and people would actually come looking for me for advice, not just you. Man that would be a drag."

Naruto shrugged and got back to studying the scroll in front of him. "Oh well, I'll get you a nice present when I show up with Hinata as a guest."

Shikamaru stood there for about five minutes trying to seem imposing as Naruto ignored him.

Finally Shikamaru let out a defeated sigh. "Fine, I'll do it."

Naruto looked up and smiled. "Well then I'll be happy to perform the ceremony."

---

"So niisan, they finally let you out of the hospital?"

Kakashi nodded feeling a bit embarrassed. He'd been laid up for three whole weeks. "Yeah, I'm glad to finally get back on my feet."

"So does that mean you can safely use the sharingan again?" Naruto asked.

Kakashi gave him a suspicious glance. "For short periods, yes."

"Perfect," Naruto said happily. "Niisan, can you come with me back to the house? There's something I want you to help me with."

---

Kakashi was standing there just staring in complete shock.

Seeing his reaction Naruto couldn't help but laugh. "So do you think it's a good jutsu?"

"Good?!" Kakashi gasped. "Naruto, it's... it's..." Kakashi was trying to find a strong enough description for what Naruto had just shown him.

Naruto's good humor faded a bit. "It's a perfect defense for the sharingan. According to Hinata it works against the byakugan too. I suspect it will work against any doujutsu."

Kakashi shook his head. Doujutsu's (eye techniques) were considered the most powerful and effective of all ninja techniques. A jutsu that could defeat them was incredibly valuable. Even if there was a drawback. "When you use it though you'll be left under the same conditions as your opponent."

Naruto nodded. "I'll take those odds every time. Niisan, you and Hinata are the only ones who know about this new technique. I need it kept secret."

Kakashi nodded. "Of course, you don't want Itachi to hear about it and try to develop a counter to it."

*No, Naruto thought. I wouldn't want Itachi or any of the other Uchihis knowing about it.*

---

Shikamaru sucked in his breath as the air rushed violently past. Before his eyes he saw trees being cut down like blades of grass. But what was more frightening? Temari was standing right beside him with a huge smile and a look of exhilaration.

After a minute or so the winds died down again and he was looking out on a couple square miles of what had been forest but was now just debris and stumps.

Temari shut her fan with a snap and turned to him reeking of contentment. "How was that?"

"Scary." He answered truthfully.

That only made her laugh. "It feels really good to have my fan back and actually be able to use it again. Being a hostage is **not** my idea

of fun. So, after I work out a bit and get back in fighting trim will our good friend the Hokage make me a Leaf nin?"

Shikamaru slowly nodded. "Naruto says that if you swear an oath he'll enroll you as a Genin."

"Genin?" she said sharply. "Who the hell said anything about me being a Genin?"

Shikamaru quirked an eyebrow. "Wasn't that your rank in Suna?"

"Only because we surrendered before I could be promoted." Temari replied. "Tell him to give me the Jonin test and I guarantee I'll pass it."

"Jonin? Temari you haven't used a jutsu or held a kunai in almost three years. You think you're ready to try out for Jonin?"

She shrugged. "Just give me a couple weeks to work out and I guarantee I'll be fine." Her smile suddenly grew and she leaned in closer to her fiancé. "Oh by the way, Asuma and Chouji dropped by the other day. They said something about a bachelor party." She leaned in some more until her nose was an inch from his. She was smiling but her eyes held tiny little storm clouds. "You're not planning on having one are you?"

"Well, it's sort of a sacred male tradition here." He mumbled as he took a couple steps back.

"Oh yeah?" Temari said sweetly. "Well in Suna we have a male tradition too. It's called castration. The women in my village practice it on their men if they prefer drinking and chasing strippers to being with their loving fiancés."

Shikamaru could feel the blood draining from his face. *Geez, I forgot just how scary she really is. And I just had to fall in love with her. Man what a drag.* "On second thought a bachelor party would probably be troublesome."

---

Naruto looked up from the scroll he was studying. "You look bored."

Yugito shrugged. "Well guarding you isn't exactly the most exciting job I've ever had."

"You know you can sit down if you want."

She shook her head. "As long as I'm on duty I'll stand."

He smiled. "Why don't you take a fifteen minute break? I promise not to tell your boss."

She looked at him for a moment not sure if he was serious. When he pulled out the chair next to him she went ahead and sat down. She wasn't tired; she just thought it was easier to amuse him. "You know you're very difficult to figure out."

"Thank you! I enjoy being a mystery to people."

Yugito looked at him seriously. "I have read your entry in the Bingo book. I know you have killed and gone on your share of S and A ranked missions. You were also a jinchuuriki until just recently. All of which means you cannot possibly be as cheerful and naïve as you act."

"Sure I can." Naruto said. "It's really not that hard."

She shook her head. "Are you *ever* serious?"

"Only when I have to be."

"Tell me, how do you expect to be the leader of your village with such an attitude? A Kage has to be strong enough to do whatever is necessary for the good of the village."

"You mean like your Raikage?"

She nodded. "Yes, the Raikage is able to make hard choices and the sacrifices that are necessary."

"Oh I believe that," Naruto nodded. "I'm sure he'd be more than happy to sacrifice you, for instance, for the good of the village."

She frowned at him. "I am a ninja of the village hidden within the clouds." She said proudly. "I have always understood that my life may have to be sacrificed to guard the village."

"That is true of every ninja of every village." Naruto said. "The moment we become Genin, the moment we accept the hitai-ite we become the swords and shields of our villages. We understand that we must fight and maybe die so that our village can live. But Yugito," he turned to her and spoke without any cheerfulness or naiveté. "There is a difference between sacrificing a life and throwing it away."

"Are you sure?" She asked with a blank stare.

"Yes I am, it's the difference between being a tool and being a human being." Of course he thought of Haku when they first met in Wave country.

*All ninjas are but tools to be used. When Zabuza rescued me he told me that I belonged to him mind, body, and soul. Now that he is gone I am nothing.*

"If we should die it should be for a reason, for a cause. Not because someone finds our existence inconvenient. Or because they fear what we hold." Naruto spoke fervently.

Yugito stared at him. "You really do believe that don't you?"

"Yeah I do."

She shook her head. "How can you stand to be Hokage then? You must know that your orders will cause some to die. You will surely be

in situations where you will have to send people to their deaths. How will you be able to stand that?"

"I will be able to stand it by always remembering that those I put in harms way are ninja, and understand why they have to be in danger. And I will *never* order someone to a pointless death. Every person in this village is precious to me and I care about all of them. My godmother, the Lady Tsunade who was the Fifth Hokage would often say she was acting as the Hokage when she put people in serious danger. She did what was necessary to protect the village, but it was never pointless. The people she put in danger were always precious to her, they were never just tools to simply be used and thrown away."

He took a deep breath.

"That is how I think your Raikage views you and others beneath him, just as tools to be used. From what you've said it's pretty obvious you don't think I'm like the Raikage. I thank you for that; I take it as a high compliment. And as proof that I'm acting the way I should be."

---

That night Yugito drifted off to deep sleep.

---

She was strolling through a peaceful meadow. The sun was beating down out of a clear blue sky. The air was filled with the sweet scent of flowers. As she walked a little grey house cat with a leather collar strolled up to her.

Yugito carefully picked the cat up and began to stroke her as she held her in her arms.

"I see you're in a good mood today Nibi."

The cat purred content. She looked up with her red eyes. A feminine voice spoke in her head. ***You like him don't you?***



Despite it being a dream Yugito could feel her face blush. "Who are you talking about?" She tried to play dumb.

She heard a teasing laugh. ***You know, the blonde boy you are protecting. You think he is cute and you like how heroic he tries to be.***

"He's not heroic he is just foolish."

***That's true; it doesn't mean you don't like him.*** A childhood tune began. ***Yugito and Naruto sitting in a tree, K I S S I...***

"Enough!" Yugito said sharply. "Anymore and I won't pet you."

***Fine.*** There was a happy pause as Nibi purred from the continued petting. ***Yugito-chan, can I ask a favor?***

Yugito sighed. "I am not taking your collar off."

A disappointed grrrr, sounded in her mind. ***How did you know that was what I wanted?***

"It's the only thing you ever ask for." She continued to gently stroke the cat's neck and back. "You know I can never take the collar off."

Nibi argued, but gave up after a short time. She could always try again tomorrow.

---

Naruto was at the library table working when Gamikichi suddenly appeared.

"Hey boss! I got a message for you, it's real important."

"Ok, let's see it." Gamikichi quickly handed over the scroll. He read it and nodded. "Yeah this is important." He looked over to the frog. "Go back to Jiraiya and tell him me and my team will be joining him sometime in the next hour."

"Right boss." The frog disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Naruto got up and headed for the door. "Come on Yugito we're headed for the Tower."

"What's going on?"

"Well, Jiraiya has been on the road since I became Hokage looking for leads to Akatsuki."

"I take it he found something."

"Yeah, you might say that." They headed out of the mansion. "He's found Itachi and Kabuto."

## Lightning in the sky

Naruto took out his katana and twirled it in the air a couple of times before putting it back in its sheath.

"That's the fourth time you've taken your sword out in the last ten minutes." Yugito noted.

"Sorry, nervous habit I guess."

"You seem really anxious."

Naruto's hand drifted towards the handle of his katana before he noticed and set it down on his desk. "Yeah, Itachi and I have a long history and we have a lot to settle."

"It's personal for you isn't it?"

Naruto shook his head. "No, he and Kabuto are going to die for the crimes they committed against this village. I won't let personal feelings be a part of this."

Yugito gave him a very small grin. "Sure." She didn't believe him for a second.

---

It took about fifteen minutes for his team to gather at the tower. He quickly relayed to them what Jiraiya had found.

"I'm taking us there immediately. Jiraiya has one of my tri kunai so I can use the hiraishin."

"Does that mean you can carry each of us while you use the hiraishin?" Kakashi asked. "I remember sensei telling me once he couldn't carry more than one person with it."

Naruto nodded. "That's right, and carrying someone uses up a **lot** of chakra."

"Then how do you plan to get us all there?"

Naruto took out a scroll.

Kiba's eyes bugged out. "No way are you putting me or Akamaru in a scroll!"

Hinata turned to her teammate. "If Naruto-kun thinks it's safe then I'm sure that it is."

"I've been placed in a scroll before, it's painless and you don't feel time passing." Kakashi said.

"Right," Naruto said. "This is how I sent my uncle Shinzou here. I guarantee that you and Akamaru will be fine."

Yugito sent Kiba a snide little smile. "If you're afraid you can always just stay here."

Kiba took one look at the attractive older woman and gave her one of his winning smiles. "No Inuzuka is ever afraid of anything!" He tried moving just a bit closer to her. "Say pretty lady, how about after I help take care of the bad guys you and me go out to celebrate?"

She let out a small growl. "No thanks, I have a rule about going out in public with someone who smells like wet dog."

Naruto chuckled seeing the look on Kiba's face. He turned to Yugito. "We should be back in one or two days please keep an eye on everyone while I am gone."

She looked at him in surprise. "What are you talking about? I'm coming with you."

Naruto shook his head. "That wouldn't be a good idea. You're a target for Akatsuki. If you came with us you'd be in great danger. It's

safer for you to stay here."

Yugito frowned and put her hands on her hips, suddenly looking like an angry cat. "I was hired to be your bodyguard. If you're going into danger then I am coming to protect you. If you were to be killed while I was sitting around here I'd be permanently disgraced. If you plan on going into danger Hokage-san then I insist on coming with you."

"But..."

"Am I your body guard or I am just a crystal figurine that must be carefully kept?" Yugito demanded.

Naruto sighed. *Maybe Shika had it right back when we were kids. Maybe all women really are troublesome, well except for Hinata.* "All right, but be very careful."

Naruto put the scroll down on the floor and took out a brush and ink jar. "Everyone get together as a group in front of me." As they did so he began writing out the necessary formula. Kiba tried to get close to Yugito once again only to be kept, quite literally, at arms length. Naruto formed a hand sign. "**Seal.**" Kakashi, Hinata, Kiba, Akamaru, and Yugito disappeared. New symbols appeared on his scroll.

He rolled up the scroll and turned to the only other person now in the room.

"I'll leave the five kage bushins here, but they'll listen to you so you're really the one in charge."

Shizune looked anything but happy about that. "The last time I was in charge was when Tsunade left to rescue you."

Naruto flushed as he felt stabs of guilt. "Well hopefully this goes a little bit better." He said quietly.

"Hokage-sama," Shizune said in a firm voice. "Your duty is here in the village. You shouldn't be leaving to go on a mission, especially not one this dangerous."

"There's no real choice. I'm the only one who knows the hiraishin and we have to get there immediately."

Shizune obviously wasn't buying it. "Why not summon Gamikichi and have him just deliver the scroll to Jiraiya?"

*Great, this is what I get for having an assistant that knows all my tricks.* "They may need me, so I have to go."

She eyed him sadly. "This is because of Itachi isn't it?"

"Maybe a little," he admitted. "But it's more because it's Akatsuki and I happen to be the strongest ninja in the village. I can't just sit here behind a desk when I know people I care about are facing that kind of danger. If something happened to any one and I wasn't there to at least *try* and help then I'd never forgive myself."

"So every time we face Akatsuki you plan to be there?"

He nodded without hesitation. "That's right. I plan to give every ninja in this village one of my tri kunai. If any of them run into Akatsuki or some other S-rank danger I plan to act as an emergency reinforcement."

"Naruto," she whispered. "You'll be putting yourself in constant danger."

"I know," he answered seriously. "But isn't that what the Hokage is supposed to do? Protect the people of the village no matter what?"

She slowly nodded. She went up to him and hugged him and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "You had better come back safe and sound Naruto, the village needs you."

"We'll all come back safe aunt Shizune." He wanted to say it was a promise but knew better. He gave her a cheerful wink and was suddenly gone in a flash of yellow.

---

In the next instant there was a yellow flash thousands of miles away.

"Took you long enough kid."

Naruto found he was standing at the very crest of a high ridge. Below him was a huge valley perhaps twice as wide as the valley of the end with a river coursing down the middle of it. Several bolts of lightning lit up a dark sky and thunder shook the air. Rain was coming down in one huge torrent drenching him in less than a minute. He looked over to Jiraiya. The Sanin's normally spiky hair was matted and flat hanging down the front and sides of his head.

"Is this is really River country? It feels a whole lot more like Rain country for some reason. Gamikichi should have warned me there was a storm."

"He couldn't have," Jiraiya answered. "The sky was clear just ten minutes ago."

Lightning split a black sky with a crash of thunder.

Naruto looked up at the storm clouds that completely filled the afternoon sky. "This started just ten minutes ago? You sure about that pervy granddad?"

Jiraiya frowned. "Of course I'm sure, and would you stop calling me that? From now on you should address me as Jiraiya-sensei."

Naruto took out the scroll. "Sure, and from now on you can call me Hokage-sama."

Jiraiya made a rude noise. "Like that'll ever happen."

"Whatever you say pervy granddad." He made a sign. " **Release.**" His team appeared around him.

Yugito immediately stared up into the pouring rain.

"Is something wrong Yugito-chan?" Hinata asked.

"I **hate** being wet." She muttered.

"All right then," Naruto spoke to Jiraiya. "Where are Itachi and Kabuto?"

Jiraiya waved at the valley below. "Down there somewhere. I lost track of them when they entered the valley."

Naruto looked over to his girl. "Hinata-chan?"

She nodded. " **Byakugan.**" She activated her blood line and began scanning the vicinity. "Naruto I've searched a two mile radius and don't see anyone."

"That mean they got away?" Kiba sounded disappointed.

"No," Jiraiya said firmly. "I think they're still in the valley somewhere. It's a lot more than two miles so they're just likely out of Hinata's range."

Naruto glanced to his other teammate. "Kiba there any chance?"

"Are you joking? There's no way me or Akamaru can pick up a scent in all this."

"Great," Naruto muttered. "This place is huge." He quickly performed a favorite jutsu. " **Kage Bushin.**" A dozen shadow clones appeared and immediately rushed down the side of the ridge.

"Is that all kid? Aren't you going to make more?"



"No, I don't want to use up the chakra." Naruto looked at everyone. "I hate to do this, but we can't risk losing Itachi and Kabuto. We need to find them and deal with them. We'll have to split up. If you spot them call in the rest of the team, we'll take care of the two of them as a group. We'll split into three squads; me and Yugito, Kakashi-niisan, Kiba, and Akamaru and pervy granddad with Hinata-chan."

"Are you sure you want to split up Naruto?" Kakashi cautioned. "That can be a dangerous tactic when facing a powerful enemy in an unknown environment."

Naruto thought about it for a moment, and nodded. "If we wait we risk letting them get away. We all have radio communicators so as soon as any of us spot them we can all join in." Something then occurred to Naruto. "Jiraiya, what are they doing here any way? Your note didn't say."

"They're chasing someone, who I don't know."

"Well as long as they're here I guess it doesn't really matter why. Ok let's split up, and remember to call in if you spot them."

As more lightning filled the sky they rushed down into the valley.

---

"Enough." An annoyed Itachi pushed Kabuto's hand away from his arm.

"You're not fully healed." Kabuto said with his usual smile.

"I am healed enough to work jutsus and that is sufficient."

Kabuto shrugged. If his partner wanted to suffer a little extra pain that was fine. As usual Kabuto's injuries healed on their own. "He put a up a surprisingly good fight."

"Yes," Itachi admitted. "He knew enough to avoid eye contact with me and we were not aware of his full ability. Now that we know he

will be easy enough to capture."

"That's if we can find him." The valley floor was wild forest with heavy underbrush. "He won't leave any tracks we can follow in this monsoon."

"Our leader will not tolerate failure in this matter." Itachi said. "To capture him is the highest command given unto us by the Akatsuki."

"So what do you want to do?" Kabuto asked.

"We will split up and seek him out." Itachi decided.

Above them several forks of lightning filled the sky.

---

Soshaku dropped to his knees within some leafy bushes. He was breathing heavily. He only needed a minute and he would recover his stamina. From within the bushes his eyes darted about looking for the men with the black cloaks and red clouds. He didn't see anyone, he didn't hear anyone, and he couldn't smell them. He dropped his hand to the wound on his thigh. The kunai had cut deep, but it was almost totally healed. Without the storm he would have left a blood trail big enough for a cub to follow. But with all the rain there was no chance of it giving him away. Having finally caught his breath he got up again and started to run.

---

Naruto froze in the tree branch and ducked down hoping he hadn't been spotted. The rain and the storm worked in his favor as his target went past not fifteen feet away and never spotted him. Naruto smiled to himself, and disappeared in a small puff of smoke.

---

The original Naruto came to a sudden halt as his clone's memories entered.

Yugito came to a stop right beside him. "What is it? Have you found something?"

Naruto smiled at her. "Oh yeah, I found something." He switched his radio to send. "Everyone this is Naruto. One of my clones has spotted a target I want you all to join with me, over." He switched to receive and was rewarded by heavy static. He waited thirty seconds, but there was no reply save for the static.

He hit the send button again. "This is Naruto, can anyone hear me?" He again hit receive only to hear the crackle and pop of static.

Yugito looked up at the sky as more thunder shook the heavens. "It is all this lightning," she explained. "It must be ionizing the air so radio waves won't work."

"Damn," he muttered. He looked at her. "It's up to us then, come on."

He began moving in a different direction and Yugito fell in right behind.

---

Kakashi and Kiba were approaching the river. With all the rain pouring down it was starting to flood over its banks. The water was a gigantic rapid. He and Kiba were just getting ready to leap over it when Kakashi spotted the kunai coming at him.

"Look out!" Kakashi shouted as he and Akamaru dodged out of the way.

Kabuto came out of hiding and landed not too far from them by the river's edge. "Well hello Kakashi, hello Kiba, nice to see you again."

Kakashi hit the send button on his communicator. "This is Kakashi we've found Kabuto and are requesting back up." When he released the send button his only answer was static. He knew enough about atmospheric conditions to guess what was going on and cursed beneath his breath. "Kiba it looks like it's just the three of us."

"That's fine with me." Kiba shouted. Akamaru barked out his agreement as well. They had actually gone on a great many missions as a unit while Naruto was away and Hinata was apprenticed to Tsunade.

"So what are the two of you doing way out here? Fishing trip maybe?" Kabuto sounded polite as he almost always did.

"We're here to end your life and the life of Uchiha Itachi." Kakashi stated.

Kabuto smiled in response. "Well isn't that sweet. So much attention from the old home town makes me feel warm and fuzzy inside. By the way, did Naruto get my gift basket? I sent him one in honor of his making Hokage. It's always good to see people you know do well."

Kakashi just shook his head. "You have guts, I'll give you that." Kakashi lifted up his hitai-ite to expose his sharingan. "But even if you have guts you're still nothing but a damn traitor."

Kabuto pushed his glasses up. "Would it help if I said I was sorry?"

"Kiba, plan four!"

"Right!" During their many missions and training sessions together they had worked out a number of combat strategies. Kiba ran through some hand signs. " **Man Beast Doppelganger** ." With a puff of smoke he and Akamaru transformed into a pair of half man, half beast warriors. They immediately rushed straight in at Kabuto.

They did not use any of their more advanced attack techniques such as the lightning fang. Instead the two of them preferred to come straight forward and rely on their speed and teamwork.

As the two of them came forward he blocked expertly and gave ground to their taijutsu attacks. He was smiling at the amateurish efforts. Obviously Kiba and his pet were no danger to him. His teammate Hinata had been much more powerful. The only danger

was from Kakashi who was hanging back as the other two attacked. *Looking for a weakness obviously, so I think I'll wrap this up quick.* Activating his chakra scalpel he lanced into a couple of shoulders and thighs as his opponents kept rushing forward.

Suddenly Akamaru changed into his true form and came up limping on just three legs. Kiba gave a shout and leapt back, his right arm suddenly hanging dead at his side.

Kabuto smiled over at Kakashi. "You should have brought Hinata with you; she would actually be a threat to me."

"I'll show you a threat." Kakashi pulled out a kunai and rushed forward. Kabuto was a little disappointed not to have the famous copy nin using the chidori or raikiri on him.

Kabuto danced away to give himself just a little more room. As the kunai hand came in aiming for his chest he struck the tendons in the upper arm with his chakra blade.

Kakashi immediately disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Aw, crap!" *He must have slipped in a shadow clone while I was focused on Kiba and his stupid dog.* Kabuto had instantly come up with the correct answer, but too late to do him any good.

The real Kakashi leapt out of the ground at Kabuto's feet with a raikiri in his right hand. Kabuto was fast enough to just barely avoid a lethal blow. Kakashi had been aiming for the heart but thanks to Kabuto's sudden dodge his raikiri instead plunged deep into the medic nin's left lung.

Screaming in pain and feeling smoke fill his throat he leapt back towards the river. The muddy ground beneath his feet gave way and before he or his enemies knew it he was being swept away in the torrent. He was swiftly gone from sight.

"Damn it," Kakashi cried in frustration. "Just six more inches to the right and he'd be a corpse."

"Maybe he'll drown." Kiba didn't sound like he believed it himself.

Kakashi shook his head. "Not that one, he's got a real gift for survival." He checked both Kiba and Akamaru. Neither was seriously hurt, but their wounds would leave them awkward and there was still Itachi lurking somewhere.

"Come on, we need to find Hinata so she can fix the damage." Kakashi led them back into the valley.

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"Jiraiya!" Hinata called out excitedly. Her byakugan was active. "I've found someone up ahead."

He looked over to her and nodded. "Is it Itachi or Kabuto?"

"Neither, it's a ninja I've never seen before and he's running towards the south end of the valley. He has a lot of chakra capacity."

Jiraiya frowned. "How much is a lot?"

She frowned. "I think he may have about double what Naruto has, but it's much less than what Naruto used to have."

That was plenty to give Jiraiya a momentary pause. "Well that's not good." He pressed his radio communicator button and tried to call in the others only to find there was no answer other than static. "Great! It picks a fine time to break down."

"Actually Jiraiya," Hinata spoke up helpfully. "All the lightning has likely ionized the air and so made radio communication impossible."

"Uhm, of course." Jiraiya wasn't about to admit he didn't know what she was talking about. "Well in any case, if Akatsuki is interested in him then so am I. Let's see if we can recruit him to join us."

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A couple minutes later the two of them leapt out in front of the fleeing ninja. They both got a good look at him. Jiraiya guessed the kid was 18 or 19. He had long silver hair about the color of Kakashi's that he wore half way down his back. His eyes were silver, with tiny flecks of blue in them. He had on some ratty tan colored shirt and pants that were in tatters and falling apart. On his side looked to be a couple shuriken holders. Around the boy's neck was a necklace that seemed to be made from the teeth of animals.

Jiraiya held out his hands in a calming gesture but before he could even speak the boy screamed out. "Leave me alone!"

Hinata could see his chakra suddenly spike and seem to reach up into the air. With her byakugan she could also see two bolts of lightning coming down as if being drawn in by the boy's chakra.

She had only enough time to scream a warning as she leapt away. "Jiraiya!"

The light was blinding and she could feel the heat of the lightning as it struck the ground where she'd been just a second before. It was horribly close, but a clean miss.

Jiraiya had only begun to leap and had been struck full on. He screamed as his body convulsed and shook and burned. He fell to the ground mercifully unconscious.

Hinata rushed over to help him. A quick diagnostic jutsu revealed that his life was not in immediate danger. However he was suffering severe second and third degree burns over much of his left shoulder, chest, and back. If he'd been awake he'd have been screaming. She immediately began the correct medical jutsu to start repairing the worst of it. But when this was over he would have to be transferred to Konoha hospital's burn ward.

The boy had not stopped running. He had not even looked back over his shoulder to see the results of what he had done. With her

byakugan still active she watched as he ran, but could do nothing about it.

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The ninja they were pursuing had stopped and so did they. From across about twenty yards of forest they looked each other over.

Naruto gave a very slight nod as proof of a grudging respect. "Hello Itachi-kun."

Just the tiniest hint of a smile appeared on the Akatsuki's face. "Hello Naruto-kun."



## Third and final

The two faced each other in the pouring rain. The Hokage and the traitor. Yugito stood just a couple steps behind Naruto as usual. She could feel his killer intent rising higher and higher. She noticed his hands trembling just a bit. She looked across to where Itachi stood. (She knew to avoid looking at his face.) He seemed completely calm. She could sense nothing from him at all.

"Your right sleeve looks burned." Naruto commented.

"I was struck by lightning." Itachi replied calmly.

"You hurt?"

Itachi shook his head a bit. "The injury was minor and has been healed by Kabuto."

An uncomfortable silence fell between them. The only sound was the rain.

"You may doubt this." Itachi finally spoke. "But it pleases me to see you alive Naruto-kun."

"Well that is surprising, considering it was you who captured me."

Itachi made no apologies. "It was the command of my organization that I do so."

Naruto smirked a bit. "And we all know how much loyalty means to you."

Another silence fell between them. High above them lightning filled the sky.

"How are you alive Naruto-kun?" Itachi asked. "When we departed you were certainly dead. Since the Lady Tsunade was alive at that

point I assume that she was responsible."

Yugito gasped and looked to Naruto. He was actually dead? This guy is just full of surprises.

Naruto nodded. "My godmother used a forbidden technique and brought me back to life, at the cost of her own." He couldn't quite keep the anger out of his voice.

"And now you want revenge, is that it?"

"Yes," Naruto was finally willing to admit it. "I want revenge, not only for my godmother and myself but for the village and for everyone you betrayed."

"This is foolishness Naruto-kun." Itachi almost sounded sad. "You cannot hope to defeat me."

"You're an arrogant bastard."

"It is not arrogance Naruto-kun. It is simple fact. Even with the power of the Kyuubi you were no match for my sharingan."

A slow smile crossed Naruto's face. "Gee Itachi you sound like most of the other Uchihas relying on your sharingan. I thought that was what you hated about your clan."

As Itachi frowned at him Naruto carefully whispered to Yugito. "Can you see in the dark?"

His question caught her by surprise. "Huh?"

"I know cats have night vision, do you?"

She hesitated; she didn't like sharing her secrets, but answered him. "Yes, I do."

"Good, get ready."

"I will not kill you Naruto-kun." Itachi announced. "But if you choose to attack me I will shatter your mind again."

"Oh really?" Naruto replied. "You won't kill me. And what makes me so special?"

"Do you remember when we first met Naruto-kun?"

Naruto nodded, he doubted he would ever forget it. "I was a student leaving the academy with my mom."

"Yes, I looked at you with my sharingan. You asked me what I saw. Do you remember what my answer was?"

"You said I was a mystery." Naruto answered. He could still remember squirming underneath Itachi's gaze. "So what do you see now?"

"I see a very powerful ninja, a worthy Hokage, and a man I respect. In this world there are only a handful of men that I respect. I would hate to lose you."

Naruto was surprised to hear that, and even more surprised to find that he appreciated the compliment. Unlike most people in the world Itachi would never say anything he did not believe.

Naruto stiffened his back and gave his opponent a full bow. "Thank you, and I will admit that I respect your courage and your skill, almost as much as I loathe the choices you have made. This is the third time we have faced each other and it will be the last." He brought his hands up and began forming signs. "Fight me to the death." He completed the jutsu. " **Sphere of Eternal Night** ."

To both Itachi and Naruto everything suddenly went black. This was not the darkness of night. This was complete darkness where even the smallest flicker of light had been banished. Had there been someone else nearby they would have seen a massive dome about

two hundred yards across appear. The rain passed through it, but nothing at all could be seen but an inky blackness.

A sudden terror filled Itachi's heart. He was blind. This was his one secret fear. He feared it much more than death. Since activating his mangekyo his sight had been slowly failing him. He was terrified. He clamped down on the fear. "What is this?" Somehow his voice was without a trace of worry.

" **Kage Bushin no Jutsu** ." A hundred clones came into being and surrounded Itachi's chakra signature. Naruto was just as blind as his opponent, but he had long since developed excellent chakra sensing skills. He was more than willing to fight blind. "This is a special jutsu that I developed specifically to counter the sharingan."

"That is impossible." Itachi ground out. He could sense chakra as well, but his skill was nowhere near as developed as Naruto's. "No genjutsu can fool the sharingan."

"Who said it was a genjutsu? This is a ninjutsu. I create a field that absorbs light and chakra. I got the idea from an earth style jutsu that does the same using a dome. Along with blinding you it will slowly absorb your chakra and feed it into me." Naruto smiled though Itachi could not see it. "So the longer we stay here the stronger I get and the weaker you get."

Itachi could feel the slight drain on his chakra. "I see, then I suppose I cannot waste time." He quickly leapt up and formed hand signs. **Phoenix Immortal Fire Technique** ." Dozens of small gobs of fire flew from his mouth.

The clones drew their swords and closed in. The true Naruto rushed forward as well.

Yugito could see clearly what was going on. She was the only one who could. Itachi's fireballs were small but enough to destroy several of the clones. The rest kept coming. Things seemed to be getting serious.

*Looks like I finally get to fight* . She released the demonic chakra within her and took the form of a miniature Nibi standing ten feet high. Her duty was to protect Naruto and she intended to, hurrying to get to his side.

Both Itachi and Naruto could sense the immense chakra that Yugito released. Itachi could only take note of it while Naruto smiled.

" **Grand Fireball Technique** ." Itachi sent out three massive boulders of flame. In each hand he then took four shuriken and fired them off towards the clones that were dodging the boulders. He could hear the light, 'pops' through the rain and sense some of the chakra signatures disappearing. But not enough of them. He continued to move and dodge wildly trying to keep space between him and the sword wielding clones. Again and again he tossed handfuls of shuriken and kunai. He was hitting some of them, but the rest kept closing in.

He landed and pressed his back against a tree. He was in a desperate situation without the use of his sharingan. He was intelligent enough to see the irony. He had condemned his clan for relying on the sharingan and their Uchiha blood to always ensure victory. To him it had been an unforgivable sign of weakness. Yet facing Naruto he had been relying on the mangekyo to ensure his own victory. But he did still have another option.

"I am truly sorry that it has come to this Naruto, but you leave me no choice. **Amaterasu** ." From out of Itachi's right eye came a terrible wall of black fire. It spread out like a wave and devoured everything it touched. Though Itachi could not see it he could hear the pops of all Naruto's shadow clones being annihilated as the fire rushed on towards the two remaining people before him. "I am sorry Naruto."

Naruto stopped his charge as he got the memories from his clones. None of them could see anything of course. But what they all had in common was a sense of intense heat before dispelling. He could sense one hell of a big jutsu coming straight towards him. He was about to leap when he felt a pair of claws grab him by the shoulders

and slammed him onto the wet earth. He then felt himself being covered up by a huge body that seemed to be made of chakra.

"Stay down!" Yugito screamed. She could see what was coming, a wave of fire that was turning everything to ash. With Naruto safely beneath her she covered him up as best she could. The black flames reached her and it felt like being thrown into the sun. She would have never believed it, but even a creature of elemental fire like the Nibi could burn. The jutsu attacked her deliberately as though trying to burn a way through her to reach Naruto. It destroyed the surface of her form but more demonic chakra flowed out of her to rebuild and replace what was lost. On the black flames came determined to turn her to ashes. Again and again the Nibi's chakra resisted and fought back, keeping the black fire from Yugito's tender flesh.

After more than a minute of this fiery assault the last of the Amaterasu was exhausted. With the threat gone Yugito released her demonic form and crumpled onto the grass next to an unharmed Naruto.

Naruto got up to his knees and reached over to her. He could sense her but still not see her. As he was trying to get a hold of her he put his hands down somewhere below her shoulders and above her stomach.

"What are you doing?" A tired but very surprised Yugito asked. She could actually see him blushing as he yanked his hands back. He of course could not see her blush.

"I was just wanting to see if you were all right, honest."

"I'm fine," she assured him. "But stopping that jutsu took everything out of me."

"Thank you for protecting me." He said sincerely.

"I'm your bodyguard that's what you hired me for." Yugito said.

"Stay right here, I'll be back as soon as I can. That's a promise." He ran off towards Itachi.

Itachi pushed himself away from the tree. Amaterasu had taken a whole lot out of him. He wasn't sure what had happened but Naruto was coming towards him while the demonic chakra he'd sensed was greatly diminished.

"Did the two tails protect you from my attack? Is that how you survived Naruto?" Itachi called out.

"Her name is Yugito!" Naruto shouted back. He began taking out his tri kunai and throwing them one after another at Itachi. All the kunai he carried now were tri kunai. "If you have to talk about her call her by her name!"

Itachi sighed. He could hear the kunai coming at him and he managed to dodge easily. It seemed Naruto was a bit distracted. "Your attacks are weak Naruto, and the emotion in your voice is obvious. I told you long ago that you needed to turn away from emotions, they only weaken you."

Naruto kept tossing his tri kunai and continued to miss. "If you still believe that after all this time then you're a fool. A ninja's true strength is only revealed when he is trying to protect those who are precious to him. I've seen what people can do when they are fighting to protect what they love. That is when they can become as strong as they need to be."

"No Naruto-kun, love is only an impediment, a weakness. Concern for others will only distract you from your ultimate goal. To achieve power you must be prepared to act ruthlessly in your own interest regardless of others."

"You're sick." Naruto growled out. "How can you stand to feel that way? I am the Hokage and I have power. But it would mean nothing to me if I didn't have people to share it with. If I didn't have people I treasured and wanted to protect."

In the blackness Itachi slowly shook his head. "It is a pity Naruto-kun. I had hoped that your eyes would open. I had hoped that you would see this world for what it truly is; a heartless jungle where the strong devour weak. I had hoped you would see the truth and become truly strong."

"If you mean become like you I'd rather die first. I'd much rather die than be like you and not care for anyone else." Itachi came to a stop and Naruto stopped throwing tri kunai. Instead he now pulled out his katana. "Itachi, is there any chance you would be willing to surrender to me and return to Konoha to face trial?"

That almost got a smile. "No."

"In that case, let's end this." With a yellow flash Itachi could not see Naruto disappeared. He reappeared directly behind Itachi near one of the tri kunai he had thrown. Moving as fast as he could Naruto rammed his sword into Itachi's back and forced it in all the way to the hilt.

Crying out in pain and surprise Itachi felt like he'd been cut in half. He opened his mouth and gagged out blood.

"It's over." Naruto said calmly. He ended his jutsu and the darkness surrounding them disappeared. The ground they stood on was all blackened ash except for a small area of grass where Yugito was. The rain was still pouring down. Naruto stood directly behind Itachi still holding his katana with both hands. Itachi's blood was flowing out of him and mixing with the rain.

Itachi was looking down at two feet of steel coming out of the middle of his chest. He was coughing up more blood and could feel himself growing cold. "Congratulations, Naruto-kun... you've killed me." There was no anger in Itachi's voice, though there seemed to be regret.

"Itachi, please answer me one question. How do I defeat Pein? If you still have any affection for our village please tell me."



Though it hurt Itachi chuckled a bit. "Not for the... village... but for you Naruto-kun... I will answer." He coughed up some more blood and began to shake. "Use the same jutsu... he has... the rinnegan... he is stronger than me... he is six." Itachi began gasping for air.

"What do you mean he is six? Six what?"

Itachi turned his face up towards the heavens. "I can't see... I am blind." Those were his final words. Without another sound he slumped forward and slid out of the katana and to the blackened ground. Naruto carefully checked his pulse to confirm there was none. He could sense no chakra coming from Itachi's body. Naruto simply stood there and looked down at the body. It was finally over.

Uchiha Itachi was dead.

# The decision of Uchiha Riyuki

**Author's Note:** I have decided to change this story's rating from T to M due to a disturbing scene in this chapter.

Naruto simply stood there looking down at the lifeless form of Uchiha Itachi. It was very strange. He felt satisfied, but also just the tiniest bit sad. He looked at his katana. He wouldn't have to wipe it down as the rain had already washed away the blood. He put it back in its sheath.

"You did it."

Naruto looked up to see Yugito approaching. "Yeah, I guess I did. Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she assured him. "I wasn't actually wounded, just tired and I recover fast."

Naruto simply nodded he knew something about that. He reached down and without ceremony slipped the ring off Itachi's right hand and placed it on the ring finger of his own.

"To the victor go the spoils." Yugito was a bit surprised but not offended. Cloud nins regularly searched the bodies of dead enemies, and sometimes dead allies too.

Naruto turned to her. "I wear two pieces of jewelry." He grinned. "When I marry Hinata-chan I'll wear three." From beneath his clothes and armor he pulled out his necklace and displayed it to her. "This is the Shodai's necklace. It was made for the Shodai Hokage, the founder of my village. He gave it to his granddaughter, the Lady Tsunade. She gave it to me on my thirteenth birthday. She always believed that it was cursed and that anyone who wore it who was not destined to be Hokage would die. She told me it was proof of her

belief that I would be Hokage one day." He paused and had to choke back some of the raw emotions from the memory.

"For me this is a constant reminder not only of her but of everyone I love and everyone I want to protect." He slipped the necklace back beneath his clothes. He held up his right hand. "This is a reminder of the enemies that will always be there to threaten me and those people I love. Together they will remind me of everything good and bad in my life."

She slowly nodded. "I see."

Naruto looked up into the sky. "I think it's finally starting to lighten up a little. But I can't write a scroll until it stops." He performed a jutsu and a clone appeared. The clone carefully picked up Itachi's body. "Kabuto is still out there somewhere. Let's go find the others."

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It took awhile, but eventually the full team was reunited near the southern end of the valley. Jiraiya was still unconscious, but Hinata assured everyone that he would recover. Kiba and Akamaru had already been patched up and were fine. The fact that Kabuto might still be alive was disappointing. Everyone was stunned to see the corpse of Itachi.

"Except for Orochimaru, he was the worst traitor the village ever knew." Kakashi said.

"And our squad put them both in the ground!" Kiba said proudly.

Hinata noticed that Naruto didn't look especially happy. "Are you all right Naruto-kun?"

He nodded and gave her a weary smile. "I'm glad that I killed him, no regrets there. But he was a great ninja and I respected him, even though I hated him."

"There is nothing wrong with respecting a worthy adversary." Kakashi counseled. "And whatever else he was Itachi was definitely that."

"Well at the very least it means this mission was definitely worthwhile." He had other thoughts on his mind. "Hinata-chan tell me about this ninja who attacked Jiraiya."

"I don't think he was trying to attack him." Hinata said carefully. "He just seemed frightened and desperate to get away."

"If he'd already been attacked by Itachi and Kabuto it's understandable if he was feeling desperate." Kakashi said.

"It doesn't excuse what he did." Kiba responded.

"Maybe, but it does explain it." Kakashi replied.

"Well if he was trying to get away from two Akatsuki I don't blame him for attacking first and asking questions later. But the fact is that if Akatsuki is interested in him I am too." He paused. "He might just be a jinchuuriki."

"You think so?" Yugito asked curiously.

Naruto nodded and looked at her questioningly. "Have you ever heard of a jinchuuriki that matched Hinata-chan's description?"

"No, the only other ones I've heard of were you and Gaara. And that was only after the battle of Konoha when it became public knowledge. There's surprisingly little information available about the biju."

"I know," Naruto sighed. "But if this guy is jinchuuriki we have to find him before Akatsuki does." The sky above them was finally beginning to clear. "It looks like its stopped raining. Kiba, do you think you could track him?"

"No chance in hell." Kiba shook his head. "There isn't a trace of his scent left to go on." He began to chew on his lower lip. "We *could* try and track him by following his trail. But that might take a good while."

"About how long?" Naruto asked.

"No telling," Kiba answered. "Days, maybe weeks, if he can whistle up a rainstorm whenever he wants it might be real hard."

Naruto thought for a moment. "All right, I'm giving you and niisan an A-rank mission. Track this guy down, no matter how long it takes. But don't confront him. When you find him contact me. If he really is a jinchuuriki we need to handle him with care."

Kakashi and Kiba both nodded.

"What about me Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked.

"Hinata-chan I need you to return with me and the rest of the group. I want you to take care of Jiraiya while he recovers and to hurry the process along if you can."

She nodded, more than happy to stay with Naruto.

With the rain finally stopped Naruto took out a pair of blank scrolls and got to work, sealing Itachi into one and Hinata, Yugito, and Jiraiya into the other. He shared some last minute words with Kakashi and Kiba and watched them leave. Shortly before disappearing himself in a flash of yellow.

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Uchiha Riyuki waited patiently in the common room of his home. With him was his daughter, his sister in law Mikoto, and the five elders of the clan. Riyuki was careful not to reveal his impatience or his annoyance.

The door to his home opened and in stepped the Hokage and the blonde cloud ninja who was always near him these days. Naruto was

dressed in full Hokage regalia today, and he looked quite serious.

Riyuki and the others all bowed to their leader. "Welcome to my home Hokage-sama." Riyuki intoned with just the right amount of deference in his voice.

Naruto carefully returned the bow. "Thank you for inviting me into your home and for agreeing to this meeting on such short notice."

Riyuki provided a false smile. "I am always at your service Hokage-sama. As you can see everyone you requested is present. Could you now inform me what the purpose to this meeting is?"

Naruto nodded slowly and took a scroll out from beneath his robes. "Riyuki-san I have come here today to inform you that the missing nin and outlaw Uchiha Itachi is dead." Naruto paused as there was a round of gasps; none of them had been expecting that. He saw that Mikoto looked especially shaken. He had specifically requested that she be present as a mercy and sign of respect. He felt that as both his mother and the wife of the father Itachi had murdered she deserved to be among the first to know.

Riyuki was the quickest to recover from the shocking news. "When did this happen? And to whom do we owe our thanks?"

"I killed him less than two hours ago. The details will have to remain secret. I hope you understand."

"Of course." Riyuki mumbled. *Naruto killed Itachi? And without the Kyuubi's power?* Riyuki was certain that once this became known his reputation would rise even higher, as Kakashi's had after slaying Orochimaru.

Naruto still held out the scroll. "Out of respect to the Uchiha clan I have returned his body. You may do with it as you wish."

Every eye was immediately drawn to the scroll in Naruto's hand.

"You mean his body is sealed within that scroll?" Riyuki asked carefully.

"That's right."

Riyuki took a step back. "Could you please show us Hokage-sama?"

"You mean right here?" Naruto's eyes darted to Mikoto who seemed to be getting paler by the second. He had expected to simply hand over the scroll and depart. He'd thought for sure that Riyuki would want to see the body somewhere in private. "Are you certain you want to see it right now?" He looked uncomfortably towards Mikoto. "The body is not in pristine condition." The body was blood soaked with a huge gash in the chest and back. Naruto hoped the man would take the hint and not insist on doing this now.

Gabrella reached over and put a comforting hand on her aunt's back. "Father, maybe it would be best if..."

"I think we would all like to see the truth sooner rather than later." Riyuki answered without noting his daughter's protest or his sister in law's obvious distress. "Please show us Hokage-sama."

He glanced again at Mikoto, but nodded. "As you wish Riyuki-san." He spread the scroll on the floor. "**Release.**"

And with a puff of smoke the body of Uchiha Itachi appeared. He was still dressed in the black robe with red clouds. His eyes were shut and his hands were at his side. He would have seemed asleep except for the dried blood and the tear in his clothes.

Mikoto wailed and slumped down to her knees, slow and bitter tears began to fall from her eyes. Gabrella wrapped her arms around her shoulders and tried to offer her some comfort. Riyuki and the elders simply looked on. They seemed, if anything, to be satisfied.

"I am sorry for the pain this has caused, but I thought the Uchiha clan would want the body returned." Naruto said quietly.

Mikoto looked up at him and nodded. "No, I thank you Hokage-sama. I know my son did terrible things and that your killing him was justice. At least this way he will be put to rest with his family."

"No he will not!" Riyuki said sharply. "He is a disgrace to the Uchiha name. He murdered his own father, my brother. He will **not** receive burial with his clan. His body will be burned like rubbish and his ashes scattered to the four winds."

Both Mikoto and Gabrella looked up at him in horror. The clan elders nodded their agreement with Riyuki's judgment.

"Riyuki please, I beg you!" Mikoto cried out. "Let him be buried with his family. I know he did terrible things in his life, but he has paid for them. Can you not show mercy? For my sake if not for his."

Riyuki stared at his sister in law who was still on her knees by her dead son. "How can you even ask that? Have you forgotten Fugaku?" He demanded.

"I am certain my husband has forgiven him, and would want his oldest son to rest in the earth with his kin."

"No." Riyuki shook his head violently. "For his father's murder and his many other crimes there can be no forgiveness."

"You granted Sasuke burial despite his crimes." Mikoto pointed out.

"That was different," Riyuki insisted. "Sasuke went mad. What he did was tragic, but you cannot blame a man for going mad anymore than you can for falling sick." Naruto had a **very** different opinion on that, but held his tongue. "Itachi deliberately chose to abandon this village and break his oaths. Every crime he committed was done of his own free will. He is a disgrace to the Uchiha name and I will not permit him to be buried in the Uchiha cemetery even in an unmarked grave." The words were harsh and spoken without an ounce of give in them.



Hearing them Mikoto broke down completely. She threw herself upon Itachi's cold chest and simply wept.

Gabrella looked at her father pleadingly. "Please father! For aunt Mikoto's sake can't we show just a little bit of mercy this one time? Itachi is gone, what difference does it really make now?"

Her father frowned at her. "The difference is that being buried with his clan and ancestors is a sign of honor. And for his crimes I will not grant him any such honor even in death. My decision is final."

Gabrella switched her attention to Naruto. "Hokage-sama, please allow him to be buried even if it's not with the clan."

"The Hokage has returned his body to the clan and given us charge of it." Riyuki said sharply. "It is no longer his decision."

The truth was that with Itachi's death Naruto's desires for revenge were satisfied. What happened to the body had never mattered to him. He would have been willing to allow a burial in an unmarked grave if it helped Mikoto. But he shook his head. "I am sorry Gabrella, but Riyuki-san is correct. I have returned the body to the clan. I cannot simply go back on my word."

With that there was nothing left for Gabrella to do but to try and comfort her aunt.

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Naruto managed to leave shortly there after.

"Well that was uncomfortable." Naruto muttered on the way back to the tower.

"You did the right and honorable thing." Yugito stated. "It is not your fault things went as they did."

"You know I think I'd rather fight another life or death battle rather than go through that again."

Yugito nodded sympathetically. "It's not easy to tell a mother her child is dead, even if he was deserving of his fate."

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Riyuki wasted absolutely no time in having his order carried out. Itachi's body was wrapped in bed sheets and carried out to a quiet corner of the Uchiha district. There pieces of wood were gathered and the body was drenched in kerosene. A few Uchiha ninja kept the rest of the clan at a distance. Only those who had been present during the meeting were permitted to witness the impromptu funeral pyre. Mikoto wept openly while everyone else looked on in silence as the body was slowly burned down to nothing but ashes and a few pieces of bone.

---

"Auntie," Gabrella spoke pleadingly. "Is there anything I can do for you?" After the things he'd done Gabrella had no affection left for her cousin. It was only for her aunt's sake that she had wanted a different ending.

Mikoto shook her head. "No dear there is nothing you can do." She rubbed her eyes and gave her niece a tired smile. She reached over and gave her a gentle hug. "You are a kind girl Gabrella, do not ever change." She let go and began the walk back to her home.

"Will you be all right auntie?"

Mikoto nodded. "Of course." She hesitated and then continued. "Do you know that I wish I had been more like Kushina."

"You wanted to be a kunoichi?"

Mikoto shook her head. "No, she had a son who was considered to be a genius ninja who had to endure much worse growing up than either of my sons did. Yet somehow not only did he reach his full potential he did so while being happy, while still being able to smile. I had two sons who were considered geniuses, and look what happened to them. I failed them both."

"That wasn't your fault!" Gabrella insisted. "Itachi and Sasuke made their own decisions. You're not to blame for what they did."

"Aren't I?" She said quietly. "I couldn't keep Itachi from being rushed straight into the ANBU. I couldn't keep him from feeling all the pressure of the clan's expectations. I couldn't keep Sasuke from being slowly poisoned by his hatred. I wasn't even able to have his curse seal suppressed. And I could not even have Itachi buried. I failed them both." She began to walk away again.

Gabrella stood there and watched her go. She had no idea how to comfort her poor aunt.

"I would like to speak to you daughter."

She turned to see her father frowning down on her. "Well I really don't want to talk to you."

Riyuki frowned. "If you are serious about becoming clan head one day then you should know that it requires you face difficult decisions with unwavering firmness. Do not imagine that you will only have easy choices to make."

"Why couldn't you have allowed a burial for aunt Mikoto's sake? Even if it had to be in the public cemetery."

"Had I allowed such it would have been seen as a sign of weakness on our part. Itachi disgraced our clan name. We had to be seen as washing our hands of him completely."

"Even when it breaks Mikoto's heart?" She demanded.

"Yes," her father answered without the slightest hesitation. "My concern is for the clan as a whole not for individual members. And besides..." his voice dropped off.

"Besides what?" Her father hesitated. "Besides what? I want to know."

He paused, but finally answered. "She raised him as well as Sasuke. Obviously mistakes were made."

She glared openly at her father. "You blame her for what happened to them!"

He shrugged. "Not all of it certainly. Both Itachi and Sasuke were responsible for their own actions. But obviously she was too weak to instill proper discipline in them."

"Oh! So I suppose she should have made them feel worthless and weak instead of trying to give them love." She spoke bitterly. She knew all too well what her father believed children needed. In his mind a parent's job was to push their child without mercy to achieve, even to the point of rejecting them. "And if you want to portion blame how about blaming uncle Fugaku for denying Itachi a real childhood. And why don't **you** take some blame for preventing Sasuke's curse seal from being locked away? Or do you think the curse seal *helped* his mental state?" Livid she stormed away to avoid screaming at him.

---

Mikoto finished the small bottle of sake. She set the bottle down and turned off the water. The tub was full and the water was nice and hot. She carefully settled into the tub. From the side of the tub she looked at the framed picture. It was of her and her husband and their two small sons. Sasuke was a year old and Itachi was nine. Everyone in the photo was smiling. By that time Itachi was already a ninja and had his sharingan. He had become more and more serious, but had not yet stopped smiling. Everyone in the picture had a smile. They were a happy family.

Mikoto stared at the photo and wondered how it had all gone so wrong. They had all been happy once. How could things had ended the way they did? She had loved them so much, her husband and her sons. All she had ever wanted for them was that they be happy. She had never cared if they were ninja or not. The family in the picture seemed like a normal one. How had it gone so wrong?

She shut her eyes and wept for her children and her husband. She had done her best for them, she truly had, but it had clearly not been enough. And now that Itachi was gone she was tired of it.

From the tub's edge she took a sharpened kitchen knife. With great care she sliced down the middle of each forearm letting the blood flow. It hurt but not too much. She set the knife down and closed her eyes as the water in the tub darkened.

She knew this would hurt Gabrella and many others, and she was sorry for that. But her own pain was too much to bear any longer. Now that Itachi was gone there was nothing left holding her to this life. As her mind slowly drifted and her strength faded away she remembered playing with her little boys as her darling husband smiled at them. If kami was merciful she prayed that would be her afterlife.

## The 77th rule

The funeral took place two days after her death. Though not a ninja she was an Uchiha and so was buried in the clan cemetery beside her husband and near her son Sasuke. More than a hundred people came in their mourning clothes to, lay down a flower and say goodbye. Most of the mourners were the non ninja of the Uchiha clan. They were part of the majority who could not activate their sharingan. These were the members who lived within the Uchiha compound as shop keepers, tradesmen, or merchants. They were part of the silent majority that the shinobi of the clan tried to ignore as much as possible. They took pride in their family name, but lived quiet lives that had nothing to do with fighting or power.

Among the ninja of the Uchiha clan only two had chosen to attend. Riyuki felt it would be unseemly for him not to attend the funeral service of his sister in law. As clan head he spoke the eulogy with a certain dignity, if not with great warmth.

Gabrella stepped forward to place her flower and whisper a silent prayer for her beloved aunt. Her aunt Mikoto had never said a harsh word to her. She'd offered Gabrella support even when her own father had turned his back. After putting the flower down she returned to her place beside Haku. He offered her a comforting smile and silently took her hand in his. She was so grateful for his presence. There were only three other non clan members present for the service. Kushina, Naruto, and Yugito each came forward to pay respects.

When the service was complete Gabrella left with Haku. On the way she stopped to share a few words with some of the other mourners. She did not speak to her father.

---

"What do you think you are doing?" Hinata asked sternly.

"Nothing," despite his best efforts Jiraiya sounded completely guilty of course. The fact that he was in his hospital gown about to jump out the window didn't help.

Hinata hurried over to the window and slammed it shut. She then turned to face the Sannin. "Jiraiya I want you in that bed right now."

A huge smile blossomed on Jiraiya's face and he let out a perverted little giggle. "Well all right, but don't you want to shut the door first?"

Hinata blushed a deep crimson and let out an embarrassed squeak.

"Is something going on in here?" A calm voice inquired. Neji entered the room with his trusty cane.

"Not yet." Jiraiya teased.

"Jiraiya!" Hinata shouted angrily.

Jiraiya held up his hands defensively. "I was just teasing Hinata."

Hinata shook her head and tried to get over her embarrassment. "I've told you before you'll need to stay here at least three weeks to let those burns fully heal."

"I feel just fine. I'm just going to go have a little sake and maybe do a little research. I promise I'll be back later." Jiraiya tried to sound reassuring. By the way Hinata was frowning he could see didn't believe a word of it.

"Perhaps I can help." Neji said. Without warning he activated his byakugan and jabbed two fingers into six points of Jiraiya's lower back. Then caught him as he fell over.

"What the hell?" Jiraiya shouted in an obvious panic. "What did you do? I can't feel my legs!"

Neji put him back in his hospital bed. "The effects will wear off in a few hours. Now please behave yourself Jiraiya-sama, I would hate to

have to do this to you everyday."

---

"Thank you for your help Neji."

He grinned and nodded. "You're welcome Hinata." Since becoming a medic nin Neji had discovered that his place in the world was not really so terrible after all. Helping those who were truly suffering had helped him to finally find some peace. He had a place of honor and was needed.

"How is Tenten?" Hinata asked. As Neji had learned to smile again he and Hinata had finally healed old wounds and become close. For her Neji had finally become the protective big brother she had always wanted him to be.

"She is out of the village on a mission at the moment."

"Is everything still all right with the two of you?"

Neji chuckled, a sound that was no longer tinged in bitterness and sarcasm. "Well she's still willing to put up with me, so I guess that means everything is fine." Actually things were much better than just fine. They'd been dating for over two years and were very happy together.

Hinata was about to say something more when she suddenly stopped. She slapped both hands over her mouth and bolted down the hall for the nearest women's room.

---

Neji waited patiently outside the door. He could hear the sound of his cousin retching. When she finally emerged several minutes later she'd washed her face but was still shaking a bit and seemed paler.

"Are you all right?" Neji asked.



Hinata quickly nodded and gave him a weary smile. "I must have had some bad sushi."

"Well let me check you just in case." He performed a simple diagnostic jutsu. He quickly found the cause of Hinata's illness. His eyebrows leapt up. Then looking at his cousin a knowing smile appeared. "Congratulations."

She gave him a confused look. "Is it the sushi?"

That got a chuckle out of him. "No, it's not the sushi."

She waited but he just continued to grin at her. "Aren't you going to tell me what it is?"

He shook his head. "I think you should perform a self diagnostic and see the cause for yourself."

She found it rather odd but went ahead. When she found out her jaw dropped. "Oh!"

Neji let out a full laugh and actually gave Hinata a warm hug. (Becoming a healer had really changed him.) "Oh indeed."

---

Gabrella was lying naked on top of her lover. Her head was resting on his chest and she could hear the comforting sound of his heart beat. After the funeral she'd needed this. She'd needed him to make love to her. Needed the feel of him inside of her. Needed his love and his touch to remind her that she was truly alive. So they'd cast a pair of henges and rushed to one of the cheap hotels they so often visited.

Now they were just lying together in bed relaxing.

"It's June first and my birthday is on the tenth." Gabrella suddenly spoke.

"I know." Haku replied calmly.

"I have to make a decision."

"I know."

"I love you and I want to be with you."

"I know."

She lifted her face to look at him. "I'm pregnant."

"I know." There was a momentary pause as her words actually penetrated. Then he suddenly bolted upright. "WHAT?!"

When he sat up she was tossed to the side of the bed. She could see the shock and panic in his face. Though she knew it was wrong she began laughing. "Sorry, sorry, I was just joking there. I'm **not** pregnant."

"Why would you joke about something like that?"

"I just wanted to hear you say something besides, 'I know.'"  
Grumbling a bit he lay back down. She looked over at him curiously.  
"What would you do if I really was pregnant?"

He turned over onto his side so they were both face to face. "I would ask you to marry me again and beg you to help me form my new clan."

"And what if I told you I wanted to remain an Uchiha? What would you do then?" She asked curiously.

He hesitated for a moment, then answered in a low voice. "Then I guess I would become an Uchiha."

"Really?" She said in surprise. "Every time I've asked you've been adamant against joining my clan."

"That's because I want our children to be raised outside of your clan's rules and pressures." He spoke seriously. "Think about Alysa for a moment. When she was a hostage she was treated with love and made to feel like a part of the family. Now she is training to try and become a ninja. Yet she is treated in exactly the same manner, no better no worse. And if she were to fail to become a ninja I have no doubt that Kushina-sama, Naruto, and the rest of the clan would still love her and see her as family. Would the Uchihas do the same?"

Gabrella shook her head. The answer to that was obvious. "If she had the ability to mold chakra and somehow failed to graduate the academy she'd be disowned."

Haku nodded. He knew as much from everything she had told him about her clan. "I want my children raised like Namikazes not like Uchihas."

"Then why would you agree to join my clan?" She asked.

"I would only agree if my child was going to have to be born into the clan no matter what. I won't abandon my son or daughter."

She looked at him. "Family is more important to you than power, isn't it?" She asked quietly.

He stared at her. "Of course it is! Nothing in this world is more important than being with those who love and need you."

She nodded and leaned in to kiss him. "I know."

---

Naruto sat at his desk in his office at the tower. He was between appointments and had time to ponder something that had been bothering him.

'He is six.' That was what Itachi had said about Pein. It had been a warning obviously, but Naruto had no idea what it meant.

*Six what?* Naruto wondered. *Six years old? Six feet tall? Six hundred pounds?* He had an image of some child prodigy who had freakishly grown into a six foot tall round ball bigger than any Akimichi. He then tried to imagine said prodigy beating the crap out of Uchiha Itachi. The image that formed in his mind was comical to say the least. He purged the idea from his thoughts.

When Jiraiya was feeling a bit better he would talk to him and see if he had any ideas. He'd held off on saying anything as yet. He was worried the man would suddenly disappear to try and find info. Once he had healed from his wounds Naruto would talk to him about Pein being six and about him having the rinnegan, whatever that was.

There was a knock on his office door and Shizune popped her head in. "Naruto, do you have time to see Hinata? She says she has something important to tell you."

Naruto smiled. "I always have time for her."

Hinata entered his office with a noticeable spring in her step. She went over to him and immediately plopped herself down in his lap. She leaned in and gave him a sweet kiss.

Naruto smiled as he wrapped his arms around the girl he loved. "Hinata-chan, is there something you actually needed to tell me? Or was that just an excuse to come in here and have your way with me?" He smirked a bit. "Because I'm fine with either."

She giggled a bit and gave him another kiss. When she pulled her lips back she looked very happy and very excited. "Actually Naruto-kun I have to inform that I can no longer perform and missions above D-rank."

"Nani?" That caught him by surprise. She had once forced him to promise that he would not try to protect her. She wanted to go on missions with him, no matter how dangerous they might be. "Why the sudden change Hinata-chan? You're not hurt are you?" He asked a bit worriedly.

She shook her head. "I'm not hurt Naruto-kun. The reason I can't go on any more serious missions is because of the 77th rule of ninja conduct."

"The 77th rule?"

"Mmm hmmm," she gave him another kiss. "You do know that one right?"

"Of course, I memorized all 120 rules of ninja conduct. Let's see," he needed a second. "To safeguard the future of the village no kunoichi may perform any mission above D-rank or be placed in any hazardous situation once it is confirmed she is with..." Naruto suddenly halted and his jaw dropped.

"With child." Hinata finished for him happily. "I'm going to have a baby."

## Flowers and tokens

Yugito was at her normal spot standing just outside the Hokage's office door. Hinata had just gone in to speak with Naruto. Shizune was just standing there smiling.

"Something unusual going on?" Yugito asked.

Shizune looked over and shook her head. "No, it's just nice to see those two together. I've known both of them their entire lives and it just makes me happy to know that they'll always be together."

"I suppose they do make a nice couple." Yugito said neutrally.

Before Shizune could reply there was a, 'thump' from within the office. Followed immediately by Hinata's shout of, "Naruto!" Shizune and Yugito looked at each other and immediately opened the door. Standing there the two of them saw Naruto lying unconscious on the floor behind his desk. Hinata was kneeling over him.

"What happened?" Shizune and Yugito both hurried over to them.

Hinata looked up. "Ah, well, he fainted." She looked a bit embarrassed.

"He fainted?" Shizune quickly knelt down as well to check on him.

"I gave him some news that, ah, I guess was too much of a surprise." Hinata replied nervously.

Yugito stood there and silently observed. *He fought an S-rank missing nin completely blind without the slightest hesitation. What could she have possibly said that could overwhelm him like this?*

Naruto came to momentarily. Opening his eyes he saw both Hinata and Shizune kneeling over him. He immediately sat up and glomped onto Hinata. "Hinata-chan! We're going to have a baby!"

Yugito lifted an eyebrow. *Well I guess that would do it.*

Seeing his exuberance and simple joy Hinata could only laugh happily and return his embrace. "Yes we are Naruto-kun!"

After receiving congratulations from Shizune and Yugito Naruto got back on his feet and performed a jutsu. With a large puff of smoke fifty clones were packed in the office. All of them of course were in the Hokage robes. They all let out a shout and began to stampede out the office doors and window.

"Naruto what are you doing?" Shizune asked nervously.

Naruto was standing there with Hinata firmly in his arms. "I want everyone to know the good news!"

Hinata giggled into his chest. He had always been excitable and eager to share his happiness with others. That was one of the things she had always loved about him.

Shizune was frowning. "Naruto do you really think it wise to do that?"

"Of course!" He replied with a huge smile. "I want everyone to know! What could possibly be wrong with that?"

---

A few hours later Naruto and Hinata were walking home together hand in hand with Yugito a few steps behind. All the way home people on the streets stopped to applaud and congratulate them on the news. The walk took them much longer than usual as they were forced to halt many times. Older women insisted on giving Hinata advice and special home remedies that they all swore would help her over the next nine months. Some women gave her special charms that they insisted would help her conceive either a boy or a girl. Many small children came up to them offering hand picked flowers along with their happy wishes. Naruto and Hinata both very much enjoyed the attention. As they approached home they were both loaded down with tokens and with flowers. They were both in a very

good mood. Right up until they saw Hiashi and Kushina waiting for them at the gate. Kushina was trying to look severe, but could just not keep the smile from her face. Hiashi however had no trouble looking stern. Seeing the way Hiashi was looking at him Naruto gulped.

---

"You are completely lacking in restraint and self control." Hiashi glared at the two of them.

"Hai, Hiashi-san." Naruto answered respectfully.

"And do you not think that such important news should have been shared with the family before it was announced to the *entire village*?" Hiashi demanded.

"Yes Hiashi-san." Naruto felt like squirming. He was sitting on a couch with Hinata while Hiashi lectured him about proper behavior. Even though he was still in the robes of the Hokage he thought it safer to just sit there and let Hiashi rail at him. The truth was he felt like a ten year old who'd been caught doing something wrong.

"Do you know how I found out I was going to have a grand child? I was lecturing Hanabi about her lack of focus when one of your clones ran past shouting that you were going to be a father! Now I ask you, is that the way a man should learn such a thing?"

"No, Hiashi-san and I apologize for that." From his seat he bent at the waist to give a slight bow. "I was just so excited I wanted to share the good news with the whole village."

Hiashi nodded curtly. "And what of the village? What will they think knowing what their Hokage has done?"

"Father," Hinata spoke up. "They are very happy for us, just look." She kept one hand in Naruto's while the other pointed to a nearby table that was covered in flowers and cards. Those were gifts that



had been left outside the main gate to the Namikaze estates.  
"Obviously the villagers share our joy at the good news."

"She has a point Hiashi. It's not as if people are upset by this."  
Kushina said. "Clearly most are pleased to know their Hokage will have an heir soon." Kushina had been standing beside Hiashi the entire time trying to wipe the amused look from her face and failing miserably. It was obvious that *she* was not upset in the least.

Hiashi turned to her and frowned. "But now they all know that this has occurred before they were even married!"

Kushina chuckled. "I think the world will somehow continue even so. They have been betrothed for over two and a half years now and have always been close. Surely what has happened is not *that* shocking is it? Especially since you did give permission for her to stay here." She gave Hiashi a knowing grin.

He tried his best to look shocked. "When I agreed to that it was so she could assist Naruto with all his new responsibilities as Hokage. I never imagined that they would behave as they did."

"Oh really?" Kushina sounded more than a little amused. "So did you and Hannah wait until your wedding day?"

With those words a rare sight occurred as Hyuga Hiashi actually blushed.

"Father?" Hinata asked, sounding shocked.

"That has nothing to do with this." Hiashi insisted quickly.

Kushina nodded. "Fine, but then lets stop torturing the children. This is not the first or last time a child was conceived out of wedlock." She turned a sharp eye to both Naruto and Hinata. "So long as the child is not **born** out of it there should be no real problem."

Hiashi slowly nodded. "Though it is far from ideal I suppose that is true." He turned to the two of them still sitting nervously on the couch. "Your wedding will be moved up to July. That is the earliest that new arrangements can be made."

Naruto looked over to his love. "Is that all right with Hinata-chan?"

Hinata in turn looked to Kushina. "Will we still be able to use the rose garden?"

Kushina smiled and nodded. "Of course dear."

"Then as long as everyone can still attend I'm happy to get married sooner." She turned to Naruto. "Is it all right with you Naruto-kun?"

"Will you be there?" He asked.

She giggled and nodded. "I don't think it would be much of a wedding without the bride present."

He gave her a huge smile. "Then it's fine with me."

Hiashi nodded. "Now as both of you will still only be 15 we will require a special decree to make the ceremony legal. Fortunately, I don't think there will be a difficulty getting the Hokage to issue one."

---

That night there was a huge celebration at the Namikaze estates. Family and friends all came to congratulate them.

---

"I'm really going to an aunt?" Alysa said excitedly.

Naruto smiled at his little sister and nodded. "You sure are, you'll have to be a role model and help protect your little niece or nephew. After all, the baby is going to look up to you."

Alysa's eyes widened. She suddenly turned around and began to leave.

"Alysa-chan where are you going?" Naruto called after her.

"I'm going to train some more!" She called back. "I need to be as strong as I can to help protect the baby!"

---

Hinata was surrounded by most of her female friends. All of them were eager to make suggestions about baby clothes and about designing the baby's room. Ino, Tenten, Temari, Gabrella, Tayuya, and even Anko encircled her.

---

The Hokage's Chief Advisor approached him with a grim look. "Thanks a lot Naruto." Shikamaru grumbled.

Naruto looked at his friend in surprise. "What did I do?"

"Well thanks to you now all Temari wants to talk about is having kids."

"So? You're already marrying her. Weren't you two planning to have kids?"

"Yeah *eventually*," Shikamaru stressed that word. "The plan was for us to have one girl and then one boy. Hopefully after us having a few years to get settled into married life. Now all of a sudden she wants a big family and wants to start having children immediately. Man this is troublesome."

"Oh come on Shika, it can't be that bad."

Temari came bounding over and grabbed Shikamaru by the arm. "Come on lazy; let's find an empty room so you can knock me up." As she was dragging him away Naruto saw him mouth the words, 'help me.'

---

Kushina was staring at a mirror. She leaned in close and looked at her reflection. No grey hair, check. No obvious wrinkles, check. She took a couple steps back. Firm athletic body, check. She let out a sigh. *I am still way too young to be a grandmother. Wasn't Naruto a baby in my arms just a little while ago? Where did the years go?* She would love the child with all of her heart. She was overjoyed to know that Naruto and Hinata would be having a family of their own soon. She just wished there was some way to have grandchildren without becoming a grandmother.

---

All the conversation came to a screeching halt as a man with spiky hair and a sake bottle in each hand stumbled into the living room. He was dressed in nothing but a hospital gown.

"Naruto, congratulations! I'm sure the two of you will make fine parents." Jiraiya lifted one of the bottles he held and drank a toast.

"Pervy granddad what are you doing here?" Naruto demanded.

"Kid, how many times have I told you not to call me that in public? Any way how could I not come here to celebrate your impending fatherhood? And like I'm really going to miss the chance to get free sake."

"Jiraiya! How did you get out of the hospital?" Hinata demanded.

"Neji's attack finally wore off. After that leaving was easy for the great Toad Sage."

Naruto just shook his head and then ran through some hand signs. Four kage bushins took hold of him and picked him up. "All right granddad, time for you to get back to the hospital and I'm putting you under ANBU watch until you're released."

Despite his protests Jiraiya was soon on his way back to Konoha hospital.

---

As the evening wore on the two of them got the chance to dance together which was something they thoroughly enjoyed. They were not the only ones on the dance floor.

---

"They look very happy." Gabrella commented as she moved slowly in Haku's arms.

Haku nodded. "They are lucky. They love each other and they know that they are always going to be together."

She looked into his eyes. "I want that too."

He looked back into hers. "More or less than you want to lead the Uchiha clan?"

She opened her mouth, but no words came to her.

He nodded, and held her closer. "Let's just dance," he whispered.

Without a word she placed her head back on his shoulder in silent agreement.

---

Yugito stood by the far wall trying to be unobtrusive as she looked at the happy couple dancing.

A familiar voice spoke to her. **Why so sad Yugito-chan?**

*I'm not sad. She thought. I am very happy for them. Naruto is a good man and Hinata loves him very much.*

**You are happy Yugito-chan, but you are more sad. Why?**

*It's nothing important, this is just how humans feel when they give up a dream, even if it is a silly dream.*

**Why give up Yugito-chan? If you like him go and get him.**

*That may work for cats but not for people. He is happy; I would like to see him happy. Besides, he is the Hokage of this village and I am merely his bodyguard. I am not even a ninja of this village. What am I supposed to say to him? That I like him? Foolishness.*

Yugito heard the low meowing that she knew was Nibi's version of laughter. **You humans are the foolish ones. Reasons are unimportant, logic is unimportant; all that matters is what you feel.**

With that she felt Nibi's presence fade away. She remained where she was and kept an impassive front. She watched as Naruto and Hinata danced. It was easy enough to see how truly happy they were.

She really did like him. Naruto had accepted her in a way that no one in her home village ever had. She respected his courage and his strength and admired his ability to just accept others for who they were. Yes, she did like him. But she would never tell him. She would not embarrass him by making him aware of her ridiculous crush.

---

They were lying in bed together. He put his hand gently over Hinata's perfectly flat stomach.

"So in nine months we'll be parents?" Naruto asked.

Hinata put a warm hand over his. "In about eight and a half months, yes we will."

To Naruto the thought that he was going to be a father was still amazing. In many ways it was more incredible to him than being Hokage. But what it really meant was that in eight and a half months he would have a new precious person in his life. Someone he would love with all his heart, and someone he would give his last breath to protect.

*One more reason why I can't fail, why I won't fail. I have to stop Pain no matter what, even if it costs my life.*

## A former student

The rain was pouring down. Kakashi was looking up into the endless grey sky. He let out a depressed sigh and looked over to his teammate. "I don't suppose..."

Kiba didn't say a word. He just turned to Kakashi and glared.

"Right," Kakashi muttered. They'd been pursuing their target for two full weeks now through the wilderness. Throughout that time it had been raining almost constantly. Which meant that Kiba's nose was useless. Which meant they had to track him the old fashion way. Which was not helped by the rain either. They had long since left River country and were now in the middle of Bear country headed north.

"Man I hate being stuck in all this damn rain." Kiba muttered. A weary Akamaru whimpered agreement. He looked hopefully over to Kakashi. "You know we've been at this for quite awhile now." He said hopefully.

Kakashi smiled from beneath the mask. "We sure have, and we'll probably be here awhile longer. Unless you want to run home with your tail between your legs."

Kiba grimaced. "I'd never do that. But we still aren't really close to catching up to him yet."

Kakashi sighed again. He really wished it would stop raining. Not only would that let them pick up the scent but he would actually be able to pull out his favorite reading material. "I know you're frustrated Kiba, I am too. But we have a mission. I've had missions end in failure and have called some off when the situation was too dangerous. But I've never just given up. So long as we still have a trail to follow we'll keep pursuing him."



Looking disappointed Kiba still nodded. "Right."

---

Soshaku sat in the damp grass and pressed his back against a tree. Why wouldn't they leave him alone? All he wanted was to be left alone and allowed to live in peace. But they kept chasing him.

He looked up as a large grey wolf approached him with a fat rabbit clamped in his jaws. The wolf approached slowly and then dropped the rabbit meekly before him. With a smile Soshaku reached out and rubbed the top of the wolf's head. The wolf growled appreciatively. "Good boy, thank you." He wished people would treat him as well as the wolves did. But they were always cruel. All of them, except for mother.

He picked up the rabbit. He couldn't start a fire in the rain, but he usually didn't bother with that when there weren't people around. He bit down and tore off a nice big piece and began chewing.

---

Pein's image watched as the gigantic turtle disappeared from sight, the last of its chakra absorbed.

"We are done now." Pein informed them. He looked to Deidara and Sasori, the only ones physically present at the location. "Well done, both of you. Now we have only two remaining."

Sasori grumbled. "We're not leaving the five tails to Kabuto and Tobi are we?"

"Yeah! That would be a disaster." Deidara agreed.

"Deidara-sempai you are hurting Tobi's feelings." Tobi sounded like a kicked puppy.

"Yeah well too bad! Yeah, the only thing you're good at is running around."

Sasori snorted, "And your partner is almost as worthless. I think we may have made a mistake in promoting him to full membership."

Kabuto's image pushed up his glasses. "With respect Sasori-sama, had the force from Konoha not arrived we would have certainly captured the five tails."

"That you allowed your partner to be killed and yourself to be so badly wounded proves your weakness. No other group of the Akatsuki would have failed so miserably." Sasori stated.

"The rule is that each member is responsible for capturing one biju or jinchuuriki." Pein stated calmly. "Do you suggest we abandon that policy?"

Pein was surprised to see Sasori nod. "I do. When we set that rule there were nine to be captured and we still had Itachi, Kisame, and Orochimaru as members. So much has changed since then we should change the policy and assign whatever team would best be able to capture the target."

"If we change the rule now who gets the chakra from the demons?" Kakuzu demanded.

"The seven senior members of Akatsuki will each receive the power of one of the tailed beasts." Pein calmly lied. Pein, Konan, Deidara, Sasori, Hiden, Kakuzu, and Zetsu all calmly accepted that. Tobi merely shrugged.

"What about me?" Kabuto demanded.

"You have done nothing to warrant the power of a biju. You may remain a member of this organization, for now. I will decide at a later date who will receive the power of the eighth demon." Kabuto's astral form looked exceedingly unhappy, but did not argue.

"Yeah, so are we doing this?" Deidara asked.

Pein glanced in Tobi's direction and noted a subtle hand sign. "We shall alter the rules. Within the next few days I shall select the team that will pursue the five tails."

"And what of the two tails?" Sasori demanded.

"That decision shall have to wait until after the five tails has been acquired. For now let us all get some rest." He ended his own jutsu and blinked out. A moment later Konan's image was gone as well.

---

Pein and Konan found themselves once again in their secret base. They both stretched a bit.

"I'm starving," Konan declared. "How about I make us some beef stew?"

Pein nodded, after three days without eating he was ravenous. "That sounds fine."

With a slight smile she headed to the kitchen to make dinner.

---

"Father can I talk to you?" She stuck her head into his study. She was most surprised to see someone sitting there with him.

Riyuki looked up from his desk and smiled. "Of course dear," he turned to his guest. A young and fairly handsome looking boy, he looked a bit like Sasuke. "Sai, we should continue our talk at another time."

"Of course Riyuki-sama." The boy stood and bowed to him. "I look forward to it." As he passed her the boy gave her a false smile that was more than a little creepy.

"Who was that?" Gabrella asked as she shut the door and sat down.

"No one of any importance," her father answered with a deft smile. "Well my dear tomorrow is the big day. You'll be eighteen, are you excited?"

"Yes, but not because of that." She looked nervous.

Riyuki gave her a knowing smile. "You've finally come to your decision haven't you?" He chuckled a bit. "And none too soon."

"This has been a very hard choice father; my heart has torn in half. I want to do what is right for my clan, but also what is right for *him*. I honestly thought he might agree to join Uchiha, but he never changed his mind."

Riyuki nodded. "That is a shame dear; his kekkei genkai would have made an incredible addition to our own."

She frowned. "His blood line has nothing to do with it. Father I love him."

He simply nodded. "Yes I know that. Love is a wonderful thing, especially when you are young. But marriage must always serve the greater needs of the clan."

She looked at him. "Did you love my mother?"

Riyuki nodded. "I did, I loved her very much. But had she been a common woman who could not mold chakra I would not have married her."

"Even though you loved her?"

Riyuki shrugged. "I wanted to be sure all my children would be able to achieve sharingan."

"Well I know how true that is," she muttered.

Her father looked at her carefully. "So daughter, what is your decision? Will you marry for love or the good of the clan?"

---

Kushina was quite surprised when Gabrella turned up at her door.

"Is something wrong dear?" Kushina asked.

Gabrella shook her head. "Is Haku here? I need to talk to him."

"He is upstairs in his room." Kushina gave her a knowing grin. "You do remember where that is from your last visit?"

An embarrassed blush colored her cheeks. "Hai, sensei, I do." She hurried up the stairs before Kushina could say anything more to her. After a quick knock she was in Haku's room.

He was more than a little surprised to see her. "Is something wrong Gabrella? I wasn't expecting to see you until the party tomorrow."

She hurried over and put her arms around him. "Ask me to marry you again."

"What?"

She looked up into his face with pleading eyes. "I know you've asked me six or seven time already, but *please* ask me just once more."

He spoke slowly and carefully. "Gabrella, will you marry me?"

"Yes!" She leaned forward and kissed him. "And before you even ask, yes I'll help you found the Momichi clan."

For the next few minutes the two of them simply kissed. All the worries and pressures of the last few years forgotten.

"What finally decided you?" He whispered to her as he ran a hand through her soft black hair.

"Haku," she spoke quietly. "If I lost my sharingan, if I were not kunoichi, and could not mold chakra, but everything else about me was still the same. Would you still love me?"

"Of course." He answered without the slightest hesitation.

She looked back up into his eyes and kissed him. "That's why I choose you."

---

"You know kid I could have left a lot sooner." Despite his boast Naruto noted that Jiraiya was being just a bit wary as he sat down.

"When it comes to injuries I trust Hinata-chan." Naruto said simply.

"You two have a date yet?"

Naruto nodded. "July second, Hiashi really didn't waste any time."

"Neither did you kid." Jiraiya teased and was rewarded by a look of embarrassment on Naruto's face. "I'll be sure to be back here for the wedding. You are having an open bar right?"

Naruto sighed. "Before we go there pervy granddad I wanted to see if you could help me with something. Have you ever heard of the rinnegan?"

And in a flash Jiraiya's good humor was gone. "Where the hell did you hear about that?"

"From Uchiha Itachi, right before he died."

Jiraiya looked very interested. "How did he know about it?"

"He told me Pein had it." Jiraiya's eyes seemed to expand as the blood drained from his face. "O.k. what exactly is the rinnegan and why do you look like you've swallowed a frog?"

Jiraiya slowly began to tell Naruto a story. A story about three young orphans that he ran into while in the land of Rain back in the days of the Third great Ninja war. He's been with his old squad mates Orochimaru and Tsunade. The three children were named Yahiko, Konan, and Nagato. Orochimaru and Tsunade had both insisted

there was nothing to be done about three orphans who were but a drop in a sea. Orochimaru had even offered to kill them as an act of mercy. For some reason Jiraiya had decided to actually stop and give the children training.

"Then one night Yahiko and Nagato both ran away. I found them as they were being attacked by a rock nin. Yahiko was wounded. To save his friend I saw Nagato activate his rinnegan. It was a doujutsu that somehow gave him the ability to wield all six elemental chakras."

"All six?" Naruto interrupted. "I thought that was impossible."

"So did I, but he did it. After that I gave the three of them as much training in ninjutsu as I could, enough to at least make them solid Genins. I then returned to my travels. I told them we would meet again when they became adults."

"What happened to them?"

"I *thought* they had all died during Rain's civil war."

"Well apparently at least this Nagato is still alive." Naruto said.

Jiraiya shook his head. "It can't be him. It's impossible. He was a sad child and absolutely hated the idea of killing. Yahiko was actually the one with the fiery spirit; he might be capable of being Akatsuki. But not Nagato."

Naruto shrugged. "People change pervy granddad."

Jiraiya shook his head. "Not like that, Nagato was too gentle a soul to be capable of the things Pein has done."

"Well at least I know about the rinnegan now. I don't suppose you have any idea what his being six means?"

"Not a clue, sorry." He stood up and headed for the door. Just as he got to it there was a yellow flash and Naruto was standing in front of

him.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Jiraiya came to a sudden halt. "I'm heading to the village hidden in the rain to find Pein and see whether or not he really is Nagato."

Naruto stared at him disbelieving. "No you're not."

"Look kid, if it really is Nagato then I owe it to him to try and help him if I can. He's a student of mine and I owe him at least that much."

Naruto shook his head. "I don't care if he was your student. He's our number one enemy and a ninja powerful enough to beat Itachi easily. I don't want you anywhere near him until I'm ready to bring all my forces to bear on him. Until I say so Rain country is off limits and the village hidden in the rain is especially forbidden territory."

Jiraiya grinned and began a shunshin. "You know what they say kid, anything worth wanting is usually forbidden."

"Jiraiya as the Hokage I am giving you a direct order not to go there."

Jiraiya laughed. "Good one."

"If you go there I swear I'll ban the sale of all Icha Icha publications and shut down all the public baths."

Jiraiya froze. "You wouldn't!"

"Try me," Naruto dared. "I lost Tsunade and I'm not losing you too. I don't care whether he's your old student or not. He's too dangerous for you to take on alone. I want a promise from you that you'll stay clear of Rain country."

Jiraiya slowly nodded. "All right kid, I'll stay clear of Rain, for now. It ok with you if I get back to my information gathering?"



Naruto nodded curtly. "Just so long as your spying doesn't take you anywhere near the borders of Ame."

"Yes mother." Jiraiya disappeared.

---

The following day.

Kiba looked up into a clear blue sky. "I can't believe it! It's actually stopped raining."

Kakashi was just as amazed. "Let's not waste it, have you got his scent?"

Kiba stood there for a moment simply sniffing the air and concentrating. Then he suddenly barked out a laugh. "I got him!"

"Lead the way."

The two of them quickly got moving.

---

Soshaku was sick of running. He sat at the top of a hill calmly eating an apple and waiting for his pursuers. When they finally showed up he was going to kill them.

## The ends that justify the means

"Kiba stop!" Kakashi called out.

"Huh?" He and Akamaru came to a halt. "Why? We're almost on top of him!"

Kakashi nodded. "I know." He took out a kunai and sliced his thumb. He then performed a summoning. A small dog puffed into existence at his feet. "Pakkun, please go to Naruto and tell him we've finally found the ninja we've been tracking."

"Got it." Pakkun disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Hey!" Kiba complained. "We don't need Naruto for this. We can take care of this guy ourselves."

"Maybe," Kakashi replied. "But that's not what the Hokage wants. He told us to contact him once we'd found him."

Kiba took a deep sniff and looked upwards. "Well I hope he gets here quick. It looks like rain." Above them clouds were gathering.

---

Naruto was sitting at his desk looking at what Shizune had just brought him.

"Forty million?" Naruto glanced up. "That's less than what Kakashi got for killing Orochimaru."

Shizune shrugged. "Well Orochimaru had a much longer career. What will you do with the money?"

"Nothing," he put the check down on his desk. "I have plenty of money already. I'm not going to bleed the village for something I did in the line of duty."

"Not all of the bounties on Itachi were put up by the village." Shizune pointed.

A sudden smile touched Naruto's lips. "Say, by any chance was any of this put up by the Uchiha clan?" He tried to sound innocent.

Shizune grinned as she could read his mind. "I believe they put up ten million of it."

"Well *that* I'll accept. I mean, I wouldn't want to offend them or anything."

Shizune giggled a bit and smiled. "Well heaven forbid we offend the Uchiha clan."

At that moment Pakkun appeared on the desk with a puff of smoke. "Naruto, Kakashi sent me to let you know they've finally caught up to the ninja they were chasing."

"Great!" Naruto began pulling off his Hokage robes. He had on his usual body armor and the Uzumaki battle dress on underneath. "Yugito!" he shouted.

She popped her head in. "Yes Hokage-san?"

"We're going to talk to the ninja Itachi and Kabuto were chasing." He looked back over to Shizune. She had her arms crossed and did not look pleased.

"I really don't like you doing this Naruto. You're the Hokage now you shouldn't be leaving the village to perform missions." She said.

"Well, I'm the only one who can perform the Hiraishin so I sort of have to." He tried giving her a winning smile. "I'm really sorry I have to go."

"No you're not." Shizune said flatly.

He shook his head feeling a bit embarrassed. "You know me way too well aunt Shizune." He performed a quick jutsu and a single clone appeared. "Here, I'll leave a clone in case there's an urgent status report that needs to be signed and stamped." He looked at Yugito. "You ready to go?"

She quirked an eyebrow. "Don't you have to put me in a scroll first?"

"Not when it's only one person." Naruto reached out and took a hold of her hand. "I can bring one person with me if I have physical contact with them. It does use up more chakra but it's not too bad."

At the feel of his hand gently holding hers her heart skipped a beat. It said something about her life that even such a small amount of human contact was enough to affect her.

In her mind she heard a teasing voice. **Oooh! He's touching you, do you like it?**

*Shut up!* She thought back in annoyance.

Naruto looked at her a bit closely. "Yugito-chan, are you feeling all right? You look kind of flushed."

She couldn't help but feel self-conscious, not only with Naruto's attention but the considering looks from Shizune as well. "I'm just fine thank you."

He looked at her for just a little bit more and then finally nodded. Hand in hand they disappeared with a yellow flash.

---

"This is so not a good idea." Kiba said and Akamaru barked agreement.

"Look, I don't want to fight this guy unless it's absolutely necessary." Naruto replied.

"That's a noble sentiment Naruto, but given what he did to Jiraiya don't you think it would be better for us to approach him as a group?" Kakashi said.

Naruto shook his head. "If we do that he'll probably see it as an attack and we'll probably have to fight him."

"So instead you and Yugito are just going to walk right up to him?" Kakashi questioned. "Just giving him a nice easy target?"

"It's the best way to show him we're not trying to attack him. When he sees that he should think we're non hostile." Naruto said.

"Unless he just thinks you're really, really stupid." Kiba muttered.

Naruto looked at him. "I heard that."

"Good," Kiba replied.

Naruto sighed. "For right now, please just watch and keep a safe distance. If a fight does start then please come in and back us up."

Naruto and Yugito headed towards their target.

---

Soshaku had picked up the two new scents drifting in on the wind. So four ninjas were coming for him? He had faced worse odds. At least the one with the red eyes wasn't one of them. He shuddered at the memory of that fight. He had only escaped by unleashing a full torrent of lightning into the area all around him. It had been the closest he had ever come to being captured. Without conscious thought his hand drifted to the spot above his heart where his seal was.

Not for the first time in his life he thought about how he seemed to be well and truly cursed. Not only because of the demon inside of him but because of his own nature. He loved the freedom of just running wild with the wolves. The problem was that no matter how hard he

fought it his nature was to be human not a wolf. Eventually, after enough months, he would start to get lonely. When that happened he would find a small village or town and try to just live a normal life doing odd jobs and trying to just fit in. Sometimes it was a disaster from the start. Sometimes it would be... not bad.

He always tried very hard to please and was a solid worker. Occasionally people would appreciate that. There had even been a girl once; she'd had gentle green eyes and light brown hair. He couldn't remember her name anymore, but her scent was seared into his memory. She had liked him; she had been nice to him. And for a little while he thought he might be happy. But then the hunter nins found him. Like they always did when he stayed in one place too long.

His hands clenched into fists. Why? Why couldn't they ever leave him alone? He would live a quiet life and never bother anyone. But they wouldn't leave him alone.

His mind snapped back to the present. He was surprised to see only two ninjas just jogging towards him. The other two were still pretty far away. They weren't hunter nins, they didn't have the masks. Just like the ones with the red clouds they weren't chasing him to try and bring him back to Iwa. But the ones with the red clouds had still attacked him. These two were friends with the ones that had been chasing him for so many days. Above him the sky was dark and there was lightning ready to be formed. He hadn't started the rain yet or the lightning, but it was ready.

He breathed in their scents. These two were different, he could tell. He didn't let himself hope for even a second that they would be anything but enemies, but he was curious.

---

Naruto and Yugito were walking up the hill; the guy was watching them from the top of it. They were about fifty yards from the top when a pair of lightning bolts slammed down in front of them.

"That's far enough," the stranger called down. He looked them over carefully. "You," he looked at Naruto. "You smell a little of fox. She," he looked at Yugito. "Smells strongly of cat."

"Yes," Yugito replied. "And you stink of wolf."

Naruto suddenly felt left out and wondered why he hadn't been able to sniff out Gaara back when he still had the Kyuubi. "My name is Naruto and this is Yugito. I am the Hokage of the village of Konoha." Naruto paused. "Could you tell me your name?"

The ninja shrugged at him. "It's Soshaku, what do you want? Why have your friends been following me all this time?"

"I've come to offer you my protection and the protection of my village." Naruto answered.

"I don't want your protection." Soshaku stated. High above them the sky suddenly filled with lightning as thunder boomed ominously. "Now leave me alone."

"I could leave you alone," Naruto called out. It was starting to rain. "But I'm afraid Akatsuki won't. They were the ones who attacked you, the ninjas in black robes and red clouds. They are a powerful organization who are gathering up all the jinchuuriki in the world. They mean to extract the demon you hold, which will kill you. They have great resources and are absolutely determined to achieve their goal. They will never stop coming after you." To Naruto's great surprise Soshaku's reaction to this dire news was just to shrug indifferently.

"So what? I've had Iwa hunter nins chasing me since I abandoned my village. They'll never stop either."

"You're from Iwa?" Naruto asked in surprise.

"That's right," Soshaku replied.

"I never knew that Iwa had a jinchuuriki or that he had become a missing nin." Naruto said.

"Well if it makes you feel any better the rock nins didn't know that Leaf and Cloud had jinchuuriki either. And I don't think the Tsuchikage would ever admit his secret weapon had betrayed him."

"Do you mind if I ask you why you did that?" Naruto questioned.

Once again Soshaku shrugged as if to say it wasn't important. "I was kept in a secret ANBU base, always under watch and isolated from the rest of the village. I was too valuable to release and too dangerous to be given any sort of freedom. The ANBU and everyone else treated me like I was a rabid wolf who might turn on them at any second. The only person who actually cared for me was my mother. She could have abandoned me, but instead she stayed with me in that secret base enduring the same abuse that I did. My mother loved me, and growing up she was the only good thing in my life."

He let out a long painful breath. "When I turned ten the Tsuchikage, in his wisdom, decided that his secret weapon needed to be completely heartless and cold. So one day some ANBU came and told my mother to say goodbye to me and leave. She refused to desert me. So, to teach me a lesson, they killed her right in front of me. They wanted to show me that the Tsuchikage had to be obeyed no matter what, that he could not be defied."

Soshaku smiled suddenly, a jagged painful smile. "I taught them a lesson of my own, that some things cannot be forgiven. I leveled that base and killed every person in it, and then I ran away." He looked at Naruto coldly. "If I wouldn't be a weapon for my own Kage I certainly won't be one for you."

Naruto's heart went out to Soshaku. He could not imagine what it would feel like to see him mom killed in front of him. "If you don't want to fight you don't have to. My only priority is to prevent Akatsuki from capturing you. You can lead whatever sort of life you like in Konoha under my protection."



Soshaku grinned. "And all I have to do is trust that you will honor your word and treat me like a human being instead of a weapon?" A dozen bolts of lightning fell in a circle around Naruto and Yugito. The lightning did not come that close, but it still took every ounce of Naruto's nerve not to teleport away. "I know just what sort of bastards you Kages are; I wouldn't trust you as far as I could throw you."

"You're wrong," Yugito shouted. "Naruto is nothing like your Tsuchikage or even my Raikage. The Hokage is by far the most honorable man I have ever met. He truly cares about the people who follow him and does all he can to keep them safe. When he says you will be well treated he means it."

"Sure," Soshaku mocked. "He's a Kage who cares about his people instead of just seeing them as tools to be used. And I'm sure in Konoha the streets are paved with gold and the rivers flow with milk and honey. I don't believe you! You just want to use me as a weapon and I'm sure the second I was in your village your mask would fall away."

"Everything I have said to you is the truth." Naruto spoke desperately. "Akatsuki will never let you go."

"Let them come!" Soshaku roared defiantly. "I'll deal with them like I've dealt with the hunter nins."

"These ninja are more powerful than any you have ever faced." Naruto warned.

"I don't fear them and I don't fear you. Now I've heard your lies and I'm not buying any of them. Go away and have your friends leave me alone, or attack me and let's get on with it."

Naruto stared at him. "Is there anything I could say or do that could convince you?"

"No," Soshaku said. "The only way you'll get me to Konoha is in chains or in a box." He waited for them to charge at him.

Naruto continued to stare at him for awhile. "I see." He turned around and began to slowly walk back down the hill. "Let's go Yugito we're done here." He shouted back over his shoulder. "If you ever change your mind you will be welcomed in Konoha."

Soshaku watched them go down the hill and quickly run off. He watched them go carefully, all the while keeping their two friends in mind. He waited for some sort of surprise, but it didn't come. He waited, after a time the four scents were completely gone. It seemed they had actually chosen not to attack him. He was very surprised, but glad.

---

As they tramped down the hill Yugito spoke just above a whisper. "We're not actually leaving are we?"

"Yes we are." Naruto answered without missing a step.

"I'm sure we can take him." Yugito said.

"I am too, I can think of at least six ways we could capture him."

Yugito stared at him confused. "Then why are we going?"

"Because if we did capture him we would be forced to lock him up to hold him safely. If we took him by force he would be too dangerous to ever let out." He looked over his shoulder at her. "I will **not** attack a man and imprison him when he is not an enemy and just wants to be left in peace. If I did that I'd be no different than Akatsuki or the Tsuchikage."

They continued walking down to the base of the hill.

"And when Akatsuki comes after him again?" Yugito asked quietly.

"Well, hopefully he'll survive and reconsider my offer of help."

"What if he gets captured instead?"

"Then he dies and Akatsuki moves a step close to their ultimate goal." Naruto answered.

"Please don't take this the wrong way." Yugito said respectfully. "But I think you are making a mistake."

He looked over at her again. "I am going to tell you a quick story about a ninja named Uchiha Sasuke. He was Itachi's younger brother. I had known him since starting the academy. We never liked each other. Somehow over time, either for his own reasons or because of something Itachi did, Sasuke came to hate me so much he decided he had to kill me. But he had a problem. Even though he was an arrogant bastard he had enough sense of reality to at least realize that he had no chance of ever beating me. I had never lost a fight to him, and over the years the gap between us only widened. But he was absolutely determined not just to kill me, but to defeat me in battle."

"So what did he do?" Yugito asked as they began to run back to where Kakashi and Kiba were waiting.

"He found a way to activate a much more powerful version of the sharingon. He believed with this enhanced sharingon he would finally be a match for me. The only problem was that the only way to activate it was to suffer the deep feelings of anguish of killing someone very close to you."

"What?"

Naruto nodded. "The Uchihas had discovered this method of gaining greater power and it was one of their clan secrets. Sasuke was willing to do anything to defeat me, and so to gain the power he needed he took his girlfriend to a nice quiet spot, and snapped her neck. As we fought he told me it had been necessary in order for him

to finally beat me." Naruto took a deep breath. "I will never do the same. I will never start down that path where the ends justify the means, where committing evil deliberately is acceptable so long as it leads to a greater good. I'll fight my enemies to the extreme limit of my abilities, but I won't become like them."

"I understand," Yugito answered in a quiet and respectful voice. *He truly is the most honorable of men.*

Once they reached Kakashi and Kiba Naruto explained his decision. The two other ninjas disagreed with it but accepted it. Shortly afterwards they were back in Konoha.

## The path of Pein

There was a Yellow Flash and Naruto was back in his office. Shizune was still there and looked surprised.

"You're back a lot sooner than I expected." Shizune said pleased.  
"How did things go?"

"Not well." Naruto sighed. He took out a scroll and tossed it onto the floor. " **Release.** " With a large puff of smoke Kakashi, Kiba, and Yugito appeared.

"So what happened to the other ninja?" Shizune asked.

"Naruto decided to be all noble and let him go." Kiba growled.

"Kiba," Kakashi spoke sharply. "It is not our place to question the commands of our Hokage."

"Not even after he made us waste all that time chasing that guy in the rain? It was all for nothing! It was all just one huge waste of time." Kiba said angrily, he didn't like to fail.

Naruto looked over at his old friend and teammate without any resentment. "It wasn't a waste Kiba. Your mission wasn't to beat him or capture him; it was just to track him down so I could make him my offer. I'm marking this mission as successful and you and niisan will both get mission checks."

The news didn't seem to make Kiba any happier. "I don't get why you just let him go without a fight."

"Because he wasn't my enemy," Naruto answered firmly. "He didn't want anything to do with me. In his own way he was an innocent bystander who just wanted to be left alone. I would have had to beat him unconscious and then held him in a cell for months or years. I am not going to take a man by force and imprison him when his only

crime is that he is being targeted by my enemies. If I did then I'd be better off wearing robes with red clouds on them rather than these." He was putting the Hokage robes back on.

"What happens if Akatsuki get him?" Kiba demanded.

"Then they win this particular fight and the war continues. I am not pretending that this makes things any easier for us. But if we really are fighting for something worthwhile then we have to act with honor even when it's not convenient." Naruto said.

Kakashi smiled beneath his mask and nodded. "Sensei would have said the same thing. Your father Naruto, was a powerful ninja and fearsome warrior but always a man of great honor and decency."

"Well I still say you're wrong," Kiba muttered.

Naruto shook his head and let it go. "Say Kiba, do I smell like fox to you?"

Kiba's look of surprise was answer enough. "What are you talking about?"

"Soshaku, the ninja we dealt with, said I smelled a little of fox." Naruto explained. "Have I ever had a fox scent Kiba? Even a small one?"

But Kiba shook his head. "Naruto, if I had ever picked up an animal scent on you I'd have said something. You've never had a fox scent."

"The reason dog boy here has never picked up a fox scent Naruto is because it's not a physical scent. The scent is connected to your chakra not your body." Yugito spoke.

"So you can smell fox on my chakra?" Naruto asked. She nodded. "Why didn't tell me?"

She looked at him in surprise. "I thought you already knew, and I thought it would be rude to just bring up."

Kiba looked at her. "Hey, the very first time we met you said I smelled like wet dog."

Yugito shrugged. "Well I respect Naruto." She gave him a catty grin.

"Hey!" Kiba barked.

Kakashi took hold of both shoulders and began directing Kiba towards the door. "Come on, we're home, let's get something to eat. I'll even pay."

Kiba quieted down but at the door suddenly looked back at the Hokage. "Oh Naruto! I just remembered something really important I was wanting to ask you."

"What?"

Kiba had a huge smile on his face. "You're going to have an open bar at the wedding right?"

---

It was about an hour before dawn. As he so often did Pein stood at the opening of the alcove and stared out at the village. It was raining of course.

Konan approached him quietly. "Do you want breakfast before we go?"

He shook his head. "I am not hungry."

She was at his side holding a pair of white chrysanthemums, she handed one over to him. "Ready?"

With a simple nod he leapt away and she followed him.

---

Through the darkness the two of them raced through and eventually out of the village. The handful of ninjas to spot them were wise enough to keep a safe distance from their god and his messenger

angel. Traveling through the land he ruled Pein thought of the improvements he had brought since destroying Hanzo and his ilk.

He had opened forty brand new orphanages and given them enough funding to actually feed, shelter, and educate the flood of war orphans that still existed. He had brought an end to the unending series of wars that had plagued Rain country since Hanzo had come to power. He had taken all the refugees that had been driven off their lands by the constant sweep of war and put them back on their lands. He was especially proud of all the small farmers who had been restored to their ancestral farms and lands. Hanzo had allowed twenty lords to buy up all the lands that had been abandoned during the war. These twenty lords ran their properties as massive plantations where peasants were kept bound to the land with few rights in order to make them rich.

Pein had viewed the twenty lords as among Hanzo's strongest supporters. He had killed them and their families and confiscated all they had. The plantations were broken up into small farms with the ownership being passed on to the peasants who actually worked the land. The vast wealth that had been confiscated helped fund the orphanages and hundreds of other construction projects aimed at helping the people.

He had done much since seizing power to help his people. But he needed to do much more...

---

16 years ago.

It was raining, it was always raining. Yahiko was looking out at the rain. How he hated it. It rained almost every day for at least a few hours, and on many days the rain just never stopped. Right now the three of them were in an old abandoned hut near an old village that was abandoned. Most of the countryside was like that, the people who were still alive were going to the cities that seemed at least a little safer. Konan had talked about doing that too, but Yahiko was dead set against it. If they went to a city or to the ninja village there



would be men who would try to use them, wither as workers or as soldiers. Yahiko wasn't about to let anyone control them.

"The food is ready," Konan called to him.

Yahiko grunted and shut the hut's door. Over a small fire in the middle of the hut two rabbits were done cooking. He had hunted and killed the rabbits. Konan had scrounged a few herbs and taken care of the actual cooking. Nagato had gathered the firewood and made a few repairs to the leaky roof. Their teamwork had improved to the point that they were rarely hungry anymore. But there were still problems.

Yahiko ate his food in fast bites without comment. He thought the rabbit was very good with all the flavoring Konan had used, but he didn't bother telling her so. He also didn't bother to slow down to try and savor his food. He wanted to get done as fast as he could so he could be ready for anything.

Konan ate more slowly, enjoying the meal and the warmth of the fire. She made a few comments about the food hoping to start a conversation.

Nagato ate slowly, eyes focused down on his meal. He seemed even more morose than usual.

Konan finally gave up and the three of them ate in silence.

That silence was broken with a few quiet words from Nagato. "I miss Jiraiya-sensei."

His two friends looked at him. Konan with sympathy and Yahiko with open annoyance.

"Forget about Jiraiya," Yahiko said brusquely. "He left three months ago; he's not a part of our lives anymore."

"He said we would meet again when we were adults." Nagato said quietly.

"And you believed him?" Yahiko replied. "How many times did he leave us by ourselves so he could do, 'research?' When we all knew he was just going to get drunk and maybe try to bed down a pretty girl. He always told lies whenever the truth was unpleasant for him. He damn well knew we'd never see each other again. He just said that to make his goodbye easier."

"Well I believe we'll see him again." Konan spoke up.

"You're both idiots then." Yahiko said.

"Don't you care about Jiraiya-sensei at all?" Nagato accused.

"I will always respect him as my sensei and as a great ninja. I acknowledge that he did more for us than anyone else ever has. For that he will always have my gratitude. But that doesn't mean that he wasn't lying to us when he said we would meet again. Jiraiya is a part of the past now we need to worry about the future."

Nagato put his face down. "Well I really miss him." His voice seemed to crack.

Yahiko stiffened where he was sitting and sent the other boy a dangerous look. "Are you crying?"

"No," the sad boy denied it but his voice gave him away.

Angrily Yahiko stood up and yanked Nagato to his feet. Facing each other tears were running down Nagato's face.

"You're crying again!" Yahiko accused. "What sort of pathetic ninja are you? Ninjas don't cry!" He began to shake the boy back and forth.

Konan jumped up and grabbed Yahiko's left arm trying to get him to let go. "Leave him alone! He's allowed to cry sometimes, I cry too."

Yahiko let go but continued to glare at the weeping boy as Konan stepped between them. "I know you do, but at least you have the decency to do it when you think you're alone or when you think we're asleep. But he cries all the time. Damn it Nagato you need to stop it! How are you going to survive in this world if you're always crying?"

"But I can't help it!" The boy wailed. "I feel so much pain all the time. I keep thinking about my family, about my home, about the people I've cared for like Jiraiya-sensei, and about the people I've had to kill for us to survive. I just can't bear it all."

"I don't want to hear about it anymore," Yahiko snapped. "You're not the only one to lose his family and everyone he cared about. It happened to me too and to Konan and to thousands of others. Your pain is nothing special! As for the people you've killed, you've had to. With your rinnegan you're the strongest of us, you need to use it without falling apart every time. You need to be strong."

"But I'm not," the boy whispered. "And I don't think I can be. I try, I do, but I don't have it in me to stop caring."

"Then how the hell are you going to survive this miserable world?" Yahiko demanded. "The world doesn't give a damn if you're hurting. The world is nothing but a savage jungle where the strong devour the weak. And if you're going to be weak all the time you may as well lay down and die and save us all the trouble."

There was a loud smack as Konan slapped him as hard as she could. "Don't you dare say that!" She screamed at him. "We're all we have, we're a family and we need to take care of each other. You apologize for saying that!" Konan was rarely angry, but when she was it was impressive.

Frowning he looked at Nagato. "I'm sorry," he said flatly. He turned and headed out the door.

Konan decided to give him some time to cool off. In the meantime she turned to her other friend and embraced him, gently putting her

head on his shoulder. "It's all right Nagato, he didn't mean it." But they both knew that he did.

Nagato rested his head and felt the comfort of her warmth. "I'm sorry I'm so weak." He whispered.

"It's all right," she assured him. She did what she could to console him.

---

The rain had stopped. It was night time and Yahiko was standing by a large tree. He didn't bother to turn around when he heard someone approach.

"You need to work on your stealth techniques Nagato." Yahiko said. He heard the footsteps come to a stop.

"I'm sorry," Nagato said.

"You're always sorry," Yahiko finally turned to look at the boy's broken face. "But it never helps does it?"

"I'm sorry if you hate me."

Yahiko took a very deep breath and walked over to his friend. "I don't hate you; I just want you to be strong. I want you to survive and you won't unless you harden yourself."

"I can't," The boy said miserably. "I've tried so many times, but it's just not in me to be hard. I don't think I was ever cut out to be a ninja."

"Maybe you weren't," Yahiko sounded weary. "But that just proves that Kami has one hell of a sense of humor since she gave you such a powerful doujutsu. If I had the rinnegan and your abilities..." He just shook his head imagining it.

"What would you do?" Nagato asked quietly.

Yahiko actually smiled for once. "I'd change Rain country, hell I'd change the whole damn world. I'd put an end to all these stupid wars and all the stupid waste."

Nagato looked at him seriously, and slowly nodded. "Maybe you could. With your strength and my ability maybe you really could change the world and bring it peace." Nagato shook his head. "I've reached my end; I can't keep traveling with the two of you any more. I love you both and I love Jiraiya-sensei, but I can't bear it any more."

Yahiko frowned again. "Don't talk stupid. You wouldn't last a week without us. Look, I really am sorry for what I said, I didn't mean it. Stay with us and I'll try to be a little nicer, I promise."

And just for an instant a tiny smile appeared on Nagato's face. "Thank you for that, it means a lot to me. Please tell Konan that I love her and if you do see Jiraiya-sensei one day please tell him too." Nagato put a single finger on Yahiko's forehead.

Yahiko suddenly felt a blinding pain; it was as if a hundred knives were all being jammed into his skull at once. He blacked out without a sound.

---

It was raining. Yahiko woke up with a blinding headache. As he sat up in the grass he became aware that it was morning. He also became aware of the sound of Konan's screams. She was just screaming for all she was worth, she wasn't saying anything, just simply howling. Despite his head he scrambled up to his feet and got out a kunai, his eyes were hurting along with his head. He stumbled over to her.

"Konan what's wrong?"

She stared into his eyes and stopped yelling, she looked confused and stunned. She didn't seem able to talk. So instead she just lifted an arm and pointed to a spot behind him.

He turned around to see what she was pointing at. There from the lowest branch of a large tree Nagato swung peacefully back and forth at the end of a rope.

---

It was not raining.

Pein and Konan stood before a marble monument. It was a strange monument. It was in the middle of nowhere, near the ruins of an old village that had been abandoned years ago. Almost no one knew of the monument's existence. Those who did know of it did not understand what it was meant to represent, though mostly they assumed it was to honor the innocents who had died in the many wars. The monument was made of pristine white marble and had many warding jutsus placed on it. It was a simple column ten feet high, on top of which a life size statue of a young boy weeping. Only three words had been carved into the marble and these were near the base of the column.

**Nagato, forgive me.**

Only two people understood what those words meant.

---

They both placed down a flower and stood there in respectful silence. Konan looked over to him, he was weeping openly. This was the only time he would ever permit himself to cry. Each year on the anniversary of Nagato's death they had come here to lay a flower at his grave. The monument had been the very first thing Pein had ordered to be built.

As they stood there and remembered him, it slowly began to rain.

## The wedding

**Author's Note:** I will never get tired of saying it. Thank you for the reviews and for reading my story! Not only have I received over **5,000** reviews but this story is about to go over **one million** hits!! Thank you all so much. As for the ceremony in this chapter I tried to make it a mix of eastern and western wedding traditions, I hope you all enjoy. Also I want to announce I am writing a fantasy story that has nothing to do with Naruto or Harry Potter or any other written material as it is all original. Can anyone tell me if there is somewhere to post original stories on this site? If not can any one suggest where I might try to post it?

---

"Do I really need to go over budget reports?" Naruto whined.  
"Couldn't one of my clones be doing this instead?"

His Chief Advisor rolled his eyes. "Don't be so troublesome, if I have to do it then so do you."

The other person in his office gave him a stern look. "Naruto you said that if it was anything that required serious thought and consideration you would do it yourself and **not** use a clone." Shizune reminded him.

"But they're budget reports! Shouldn't an accountant be looking at these instead of the Hokage?" Naruto pleaded. He had started looking into a really great jutsu and wanted to get back to it.

"The village accountants are the ones who put the monthly reports together." Shikamaru confirmed. "But you still need to be familiar with them to make decisions on where to make any necessary cuts or invest any surpluses."

Naruto suddenly smiled. "You know Shikamaru as Chief Advisor..."

Shikamaru gave him a flat look. "I'm not doing this by myself Naruto so stop trying to get out of it."

As Naruto stared down at all the numbers in front of him there was a knock on the door. One of his many secretaries stuck her head in. "I beg pardon Hokage-sama, but Momichi Haku and Uchiha Gabrella are here requesting to talk to you."

"Well send them right in!" He said eagerly.

The two entered hand in hand. Their recent engagement was a well known fact throughout Konoha. The fact that Gabrella (much like Hinata) had since moved into the Namikaze mansion was a closely guarded secret.

Naruto stood up from behind his desk to greet them. "Hey you two, what are you wanting to talk to me about?" He grinned. "Something you couldn't ask over breakfast?"

Haku and Gabrella glanced at each other. "Actually Naruto, could we talk in private?"

"Well that sounds kind of serious." He politely asked if Shikamaru and Shizune would mind giving them a few minutes. Once it was the three of them Naruto sat back down and waved the two of them to be seated as well.

"So what's so important you didn't want Shikamaru or Shizune to hear?"

The young couple looked at each other again. "Well to begin with I would like to formally request to establish a clan here in Konoha, the Momichi clan."

Naruto had a huge smile. "Done, I've actually been waiting for this." He pulled a sheet out of a desk drawer. He signed and stamped the paper. "By order of the Hokage I recognize you, Momichi Haku, as the founder and head of the Momichi clan. You shall be given lands,



those lands to belong to your clan for so long as you faithfully serve the village of Konohagakure and it's Hokage. You will be granted the same rights and privileges of any other recognized clan, including a hereditary seat on the Council." He handed over the official order. "Congratulations!"

"Thank you Hokage-sama, and thank you for everything you have done for me, you and Kushina-sama."

"It has always been my pleasure Haku. I like to think that you and I are proof that enemies can become friends."

"Where will the lands be?" Gabrella asked.

"Well, if you don't object, I was thinking of turning training ground 16 over to you. That's also where the lands for the Uzumaki estates will be. So you would become neighbors to Uzumaki and only be a couple miles from Namikaze and Hyuga."

Haku smiled. "I would like that very much."

"Now you will have to pay for the construction of your mansion or home on your own." Naruto pointed out. "I know my mom would be happy to help with that."

But Haku shook his head. "The Namikaze clan had already been more than generous to me; I could not take your money. Especially not for something that is sure to be hugely expensive."

"My uncle Shinzou doesn't have a problem with it."

"But he is a blood relative whereas I am only a friend." Haku said.

"You're a lot more than, 'just' a friend to me and my mom."

Haku nodded respectfully. "Thank you for that, but I still do not want any money from you."

Gabrella sighed, "I would have liked to have helped but I don't seem to be very popular with my clan right now."

"Oh?" Naruto quirked an eyebrow.

She slowly nodded. "My father and the clan elders were all for me marrying Haku, so long as he became an Uchiha. When I told them I was going to marry him and join his clan they became rather cold."

"They asked her to leave the Uchiha compound." Haku sounded a bit angry. "They have not gone so far as to actually disown her, but she is no longer welcome."

"It's not the entire clan," Gabrella was quick to point out. "Most of my clansmen are happy for me. It's only the leadership of the clan that is unhappy."

"Which includes your father." Naruto said flatly.

She could only nod. "I had hoped the clan might be willing to give Haku a loan, but well, that's not going to happen."

And suddenly Naruto had a marvelous idea and began to chuckle. "You know Gabrella I agree with you, the Uchiha clan should help." He reached into another drawer. He held out a check. "Here, this is for you. Think of it as one hell of a wedding gift."

"I have already said that I will not take your money." Haku said.

"Oh, but it's not my money, not really. It's not from my clan or from the village; it's from the Uchiha clan."

"What?" Gabrella snatched the check out of the Hokage's hand and looked it over. "This bears my father's signature and it's for ten million ryu. How on earth did you get this?"

"It's the payment of the bounties that were put on Itachi." Naruto stated.

"But you earned that money by killing him." Haku stated. "I still can't accept it."

Gabrella looked over to him. "Haku honey, we're taking the money."

He looked at her in surprise. "But..."

"No buts," she said firmly. "This new clan will have your name but I am just as much a founder of it as you are. Our children and their descendents will have the sharingan as well as your blood line. Since I am helping found a brand new clan it is only right that my original clan help a bit." With that she folded up the check and made it disappear.

Naruto had an amused look. "Gabrella you do know that Haku qualifies under the law of clan restoration and can have up to three..." Seeing her glare Naruto came to an abrupt halt.

"I know all about that law." Gabrella replied coolly. "Haku and I have discussed it. He won't be having any other wives, right honey?"

Haku nodded. "Yes, dear."

Gabrella looked back to Naruto and her look softened a bit. "Speaking of the clan restoration law don't *you* qualify under it?"

"As a matter of fact I do."

"Does that mean you plan on marrying again after next week?"

Naruto shook his head. "No, I love Hinata with my entire heart. There could never be anyone else for me."

Haku smiled and looked over at Gabrella. "I know how you feel."

---

The evening of July first.

Kushina was sitting down in a chair when Alysa came bounding inside. She hurried over to her mother and sat down in her lap. Kushina laughed and gave her young daughter a hug and kiss on the cheek.

"Are you all done with practice today?" Kushina asked.

"Yes kaasan, uncle and grand uncle let me stop early today; they usually make me work until I am exhausted."

"Well dear they're just trying to get you ready for the academy. Uzumaki training methods are very hard but very effective."

"Is this how you and niisan became ninja?"

"That's right."

Alysa smiled. "Then I will keep working hard so I can be a great ninja too."

Kushina laughed and gave her another small kiss. "Are you ready for the wedding tomorrow? You know you have the most important job."

"Really?" Alysa said excitedly.

Kushina nodded and gave her a serious look while trying not to giggle. "Oh absolutely dear without you Naruto and Hinata won't be able to get married."

She immediately jumped off her mother's lap. "I better go practice then!"

---

Kiba turned to his friend. "You completely suck, you know that right?"

Kakashi sighed. "Kiba this is supposed to be a happy occasion."

Shikamaru meanwhile was hardly upset by Kiba's opinion. "What makes you say that?"

"You call this a bachelor party?!" He waved his arms about at the table where all of Naruto's male friends had gathered. They were in a bar enjoying a few drinks and sharing stories about their friend. "Naruto isn't even here and why are there no strippers?!" Kiba demanded to know.

"Yosh, I think this is a fine party!" Lee spoke up.

"You would," Kiba muttered.

Shikamaru sighed. "You are really being troublesome. Naruto specifically told me he didn't want a bachelor party so I thought we could just have a few drinks in his honor instead."

"But it's a sacred male tradition!" Kiba complained.

Shikamaru shrugged. "He promised Hinata he wouldn't have one and Temari told me that if I threw one she would beat me with her fan."

Kiba looked at him with open contempt. "Shika you are completely and totally whipped!" Kiba began to chug his beer.

Shikamaru shrugged. "Maybe, but at least I'll be having sex tonight."

Kiba immediately started choking on his beer to everyone else's amusement.

---

As Kiba was staggering home with Akamaru patiently at his side. (Kiba didn't want to drink and ride.) He ran into Jiraiya, and the two gorgeous women who were with him. He had a blonde with a tank top and a mini skirt that could have belonged to Anko. He also had a woman with raven hair in a low cut black evening gown that was split down the side to reveal a whole lot of leg. Both women were... well endowed and looked to be in their 20's. The old lecher had an arm wrapped around each and they were headed down the street towards one of his houses.

"So you ladies ready for a trip to a hot tub?" Jiraiya asked with a perverted giggle.

Both women laughed and nodded.

"How do you do that?" Kiba shouted.

"Huh?" Jiraiya looked up and spotted Kiba and his huge dog. "Were you talking to me kid?"

Kiba drunkenly nodded. "How does an old guy like you get such hot women?"

Jiraiya looked offended. "Don't you know who I am kid? I am the legendary Jiraiya! The great Toad Sage, victor of a hundred battles, member of the legendary three, student of the great Sarutobi, and sensei to not one but **two** Hokages! For me women fall like cherry blossoms in a wind storm!" He declared proudly.

The blonde girl giggled. "He took us shopping and got us a lot of really nice things."

Suddenly deflated he got the two women moving again leaving Kiba and Akamaru on their own once more.

Kiba looked over to his faithful companion. "Man, I hate being a virgin." His dog nodded and whimpered agreement.

---

July second was an absolutely beautiful day. Hinata left immediately after breakfast to go to the Hyuga mansion where she would prepare. The Namikaze mansion meanwhile was the sight of barely controlled chaos as the entire household prepared for the wedding. A perimeter of ANBU had already been set up to watch out for any possible trouble. A hundred caterers had arrived and were busy setting up the temporary seats and other structures. The reception would be held outside along with the wedding. Tables were being set up and the meals prepared. Cases of beer and hundreds of bottles

of sake and other liquors were assembled and then surrounded by four long tables forming a square. They knew what an open bar meant and expected to be under siege the entire time.

Inside men and women dressed up in their very best and quickly rehearsed their parts. All the members of both the Namikaze and Uzumaki clans were part of the wedding party. Kushina was especially busy as she ran about making sure everything was absolutely perfect for her son's wedding day. The wedding was rather unique in the fact that it had been both meticulously planned and thrown together.

For over two and a half years she and Hinata had been planning this day until every last detail had been decided and worked out. Then of course the, 'accident' had forced them to change the dates. Kushina had suddenly found herself rushing about like a mad woman trying to secure the services of all the people necessary. Not surprisingly the caterers, the band, and the priest had made prior commitments to a pair of other weddings.

Though she didn't like to resort to it, she was not above using bribery when it meant giving her son and her future daughter the perfect wedding. It had not been easy. She'd been required to buy one of the couples a new house, spent a couple hundred thousand ryo on top of that, and even arranged for the Hokage to do a few, 'favors' for the families involved. But in the end she had convinced the other parties to change the dates of their weddings and so free up July 2nd. Of course as busy as she was it had been impossible to check on everything.

Running through the halls of her home she came to a sudden and abrupt halt.

"Anko! What the hell are you wearing?!" Kushina demanded.

Anko sent her an annoyed look. "What? This is what I always wear." She had on her usual tan trench coat, mini skirt, and fishnet.

"Why aren't you in your kimono?"

Anko grinned. "You're kidding right? I didn't wear one to my own wedding what makes you think I was going to wear one here?" Her grin disappeared as she felt a sudden flood of killer intent coming from the groom's mother.

"Anko," Kushina ground out feeling her blood pressure rising and her temper shortening. "Whether you like it or not as my brother's wife you are automatically part of the wedding party. You are **not** going out dressed like that."

Anko took out a kunai and began to casually twirl it around her finger. "Yes I am." Anko replied defiantly.

"No you are not." Kushina's killer intent jumped up a couple notches.

Drawn by the familiar feel of his little sister's killer intent Shinzou entered the hall. "Is there a problem kooky?"

Kushina sent her brother a glare. "Did you know your wife here plans to attend the wedding dressed like that?"

He smiled and turned to Anko. "Honey, I know we talked about this. You already agreed to dress up for the wedding."

Anko began to pout. "But..."

Shinzou took his wife into his arms and kissed her. " *Please* Anko, just to make me happy?"

Anko grinned and nodded. "Fine but you owe me one and I'll be collecting payment tonight." Kushina received an annoyed look as Anko headed to her room, hopefully to change.

Kushina looked at her brother. "Why are you still married to that woman?"



Shinzou tried to look innocent. "Well she does thing with her tongue..."

Kushina slapped her hands over her ears and ran away.

---

Yugito stood in front of a full size mirror. She was wearing a kimono that Kushina had thoughtfully had custom made for her. It was gold colored the image of a grey cat playing with a ball of yarn across the front. She really liked it.

She felt very strange wearing it though; she had never worn a kimono before. She could not remember the last time she had gone out in public in anything but ninja clothing. Looking at herself she had a sudden fantasy of Naruto seeing her in it and suddenly feeling the irresistible urge to start kissing her. She saw herself blushing in the mirror.

In the back of her mind she heard a childish voice begin singing.  
***Yugito and Naruto sitting in a tree, K I S S I N G!***

*Quiet Nibi!*

---

As noon approached the guests began to arrive and take their seats. Many of them were friends and members of the Hyuga clan. But as the Hokage was getting married there was no way to avoid also inviting all the clan heads and important officials. It made for an interesting mix. Neji and Tenten arrived together and sat down on the bride's side. Haku and Gabrella were already there of course. Their teammate Tayuya arrived stag muttering to herself that she was only there for the open bar. Danzo came and was seated up near the front. Uchiha Riyuki arrived soon after. He made a point to say a quick hello to his daughter and her fiancé before being seated. He was careful not to look to where Danzo was. Lee arrived there on his own. The best man came with a beautiful but troublesome blonde. Ino and Chouji came together; she sent a frosty glance towards

Temari but otherwise was in a fine mood. More people arrived alone and in groups until the seats were all filled.

---

Naruto was in the traditional black montsuki kimono and pacing back and forth. His mother entered his room and saw him.

"It's time Naruto-kun." Kushina told her son. "Here, let me look at you. You look so handsome!"

He nodded nervously. "Thanks mom."

She placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You don't need to be so nervous my son." She smiled happily.

"I know that mom, but I sort of can't help it."

Even though she was happy Kushina had to fight the urge to burst into tears. "My baby is getting married!"

"Mom, I'm not a baby." He replied. He paused and looked at his mother and then embraced. "Mom, thank you so much."

"For what dear?"

"For everything mom, for taking care of me, for training me, for teaching me right from wrong, but most of all just for loving me. All that I am is because of you and your love."

"Ah my son," she let out a small sob. "A mother's love should be the one thing in this world that every single person should know. You don't ever need to thank me for that Naruto-kun. From the very first time I held you in my arms I loved you and just having you in my life has been the greatest joy I have ever known." She quickly dabbed her eyes and smiled at him. "Now come on, before your silly mother makes you late for your own wedding!"

---

It was exactly noon. The band began to play the march. A temporary arch had been put up in the rose garden with a long red carpet leading to it. The chairs had been set up on either side. As the music began Hyuga Hiashi led his eldest daughter down the aisle at a stately pace. At the other end of the carpet Naruto was standing flanked by Shikamaru and his mother. Little Alysa was standing close by in a pink kimono holding up a silk pillow with two rings.

Hiashi and Hinata moved slowly towards them. Hinata's left hand was held out in front of her and was in her father's right. In her other hand Hinata held a bouquet of red roses. Hinata was in a silk shiromaku of purest white. As she came down the aisle Ino was holding the edge of the wedding kimono to prevent it from dragging along the ground. Hinata's face was done in white and her dark hair had been put up. Her make up only made her beautiful eyes stand out even more.

As Naruto watched her he thought she looked like an angel who had come to earth. He honestly wondered what he had ever done in his life to have earned the love of such an amazing woman.

---

As she walked down the aisle all she could see was him, so handsome, so kind, and so *loving*. He was smiling at her and looking at her with eyes filled with devotion. She had always loved him, she could not remember a time in her life when she had not. To her he was her heart and always would be, she would never love anyone else but him. And as she moved closer to him she honestly wondered what she had ever done in her life to have earned the love of such an amazing man.

---

When they had at least reached the end of the aisle Hiashi ceremoniously took his daughter's hand and placed it into Naruto's. Together the couple turned to face the priest standing before them in his white blouse and billowing red pants. Smiling the priest took out a small cup and carefully filled it with ceremonial sake.

"Share in this drink as the two of you will share in all of life's joys and hardships." The priest intoned.

He handed the cup to Naruto who took a small sip. He then passed it to Hinata who also sipped from it.

"Have you come here to devote yourselves to one another of your own free will?" The priest questioned.

"Yes," Naruto answered solemnly.

"Hai," Hinata said.

The priest looked out sternly upon the assembled guests. "Can any here give just cause why these two should not be joined in sacred marriage?"

If anyone had dared to say a word at that point Kushina likely would have killed them on the spot.

Satisfied the priest returned his attention to the two of them. "Do you understand that the vows you make this day are spoken before Kami and before all those who have come here to bear witness?"

"Yes," Naruto said.

"Yes," Hinata said.

"Then speak the vows, and speak only the truth."

Smiling down at Alysa Naruto took the smaller of the two gold rings. He then carefully slid it on to Hinata's left hand as he spoke.

"My wife, in sickness and in health I promise that I will love you, respect you, console you, be faithful to you, and protect you. From this day on until the day of my death, this do I swear."

With her hands trembling slightly Hinata took the other wedding band and placed it on Naruto's left hand.

"My husband, in sickness and in health I promise that I will love you, respect you, console you, be faithful to you, and protect you. From this day on until the day of my death, this do I swear."

The priest held his hand up. "May Kami grant you the blessings of health, happiness, and children. May your union be long and lasting. I declare that you are now husband and wife." He smiled and nodded to Naruto. "You may kiss your bride."

Naruto was only too happy to do so.

"May I present to you," the priest called out. "Namikaze Naruto and his bride, Namikaze Hinata."

As the people began to applaud and cheer the young couple broke their kiss and looked into each other's eyes.

"I love you." Naruto whispered to her.

"And I love you." Hinata answered.

They kissed once more as all around them people celebrated.

# The reception

**Author's Note:** Since this story has an M rating I have decided to go ahead and write profanity as it comes up, no more f#&k and such. I have set up an account with and will set up a link once I post something there. Now a few people have asked if the story is coming to its end. Well, yes it is, but it still isn't there just yet. Expect this story to end somewhere between one hundred and one hundred and twenty chapters.

---

Given her normal concerns for security (Mizuki) Kushina had decided that the mansion would be off limits to all those who did not already live there. Instead the reception would be held outside. Many round tables were set up with eight places each. The food was the gourmet and the best that could be provided. A small stand had been set up where the band would play an area was cleared for dancing. After night fall a fire works display would be put on for the entire village to enjoy. And of course, there was an open bar serving an endless stream of beer and sake. One thing that could never be said was that Kushina worried about cost when it came to her son.

Immediately upon the ceremony being completed the bar was opened. A couple people managed to get there with an indecent amount of speed.

" **Sake!!**" Kiba and Jiraiya both yelled at the same time.

Jiraiya looked over at the young ninja. "Hey kid, I remember you from last night."

Kiba snorted. "Yeah, I remember you too Jiraiya-sama. Pretty sad, an old guy like you having to bribe women to be with him."

Jiraiya smiled as he collected his bottle of sake and began to wander off to talk to some of the beauties who were here. Weddings were

among the best places to get lucky. "Maybe, but still not as sad as a young guy complaining to his dog that he's a virgin."

Kiba began to choke as he couldn't come up with anything to say.

"Virgin, huh?" A feminine voice spoke from behind.

He turned around. There was Tayuya standing there in a cream colored kimono grinning at him.

"Oh Kami just take me now." Kiba muttered as he picked up his bottle of sake and downed about half of it in a swig. It was high quality and strong, he could feel it burn on the way down.

Tayuya looked at the bartender. "Sake, and don't bother with the cup." She then looked back over to Kiba. "So you're a fucking virgin huh?"

Kiba growled a bit. "No I'm not!"

She brought the little ceramic bottle to her lips and tossed most of it back in one shot. "No huh? Then name one girl you've been with."

Kiba blushed a bit. He put the empty bottle down and ordered another one. He was already feeling just a little warm. "I'm just waiting for the right girl." He dropped his eyes to the bar.

Tayuya finished the sake and ordered a second one herself. "Well maybe you'll luck out and find someone drunk enough that she doesn't mind that wet dog smell."

"Bite me." He muttered and started on bottle number 2.

---

A large table had been set aside for wedding gifts, and it was loaded down with all sorts of goodies ranging from fine china to simple wads of cash. A few people however insisted on giving their gifts directly to the happy couple.

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Inuzuka Tsume, Kiba's mother and head of the clan handed them a small box with a pink bow and air holes. "Congratulations and best wishes for many, many pups. Here, you might want to open this now rather than later."

Hinata took the box and opened it. A little grey puppy with large brown eyes looked up at her. "Oh how adorable!" Hinata squealed.

Naruto smiled. "Arigato Tsume, I know how rare it is for your clan to part with any of the dogs from your kennel." It was true; the Inuzuka clan bred the finest dogs on the continent. There was a huge demand for them but the clan never sold any of them, and only rarely offered them as gifts.

Tsume barked and laugh and gave him a rough bow. "It is my pleasure. Not only are you the Hokage but my son's friend and teammate."

"Oh what a cute puppy!" Alysa came over on the run. "Can I hold him?"

Smiling Hinata carefully handed the dog over to her. "Of course."

Alysa held the tiny puppy up close to her face. He licked her nose and the little girl laughed in delight. "Oh I love him!"

Naruto gave his new wife a questioning look. Hinata smiled and nodded. "Alysa-chan," Naruto asked. "Would you like to be the one to take care of him?"

"Really?!" Alysa asked excitedly.

Naruto nodded and gave her a serious look. "I'm sure mom would be fine with it, but it's a serious responsibility. He will depend on you and you must take good care of him."



"I will, I promise!" Alysa laughed and hugged her new pet to her. "Oh, what's his name?"

Tsume smiled at the little girl. "He is called Chicchai."

Naruto smiled. "He is called, 'little?' Does that mean we will have to change his name if he gets as big as Akamaru?"

Alysa looked extremely happy. "Hello Chicchai, my name is Alysa and I promise to take care of you from now on." The puppy yipped and wagged his little tail in apparent agreement.

---

"Here you are, I hope you'll put it to good use." Kakashi smiled as he handed them a large orange book. Naruto accepted it with an amused look while Hinata was frowning.

"Well thanks niisan, nothing says, 'good luck with your marriage' quite like porn."

"It's adult literature," Kakashi grinned. "It's the hardcover collection of the Icha Icha series volumes one through ten."

Hinata managed a slight smile. "Thank you Kakashi-sensei, I promise we will find a use for it." *I am sure we can put it to good use in the fireplace.*

---

"Congratulations on your wedding!" Temari said happily. She handed Hinata a small velvet case about a foot long and a few inches wide. "It's a ceremonial fan."

Hinata opened the case and took it out. "It's exquisite! Thank you Temari-chan I love it!"

Meanwhile Shikamaru presented his gift to Naruto. It was a small book with a plain brown cover.

Naruto read the cover. "How to deal with your wife's mood swings." Naruto just looked at Shikamaru.

"Trust me you'll need that before long." Shikamaru said simply.

---

A tipsy Jiraiya handed him a large orange book. "Here you go kid. Be sure to use it." Jiraiya began giggling as he headed back to the bar.

Naruto turned to his wife and held up the large orange covered tome. "Look honey, book ends."

Hinata shook her head and took the book from him. "Look Naruto-kun, kindling."

---

The meal was soon being served. The wedding party was seated at two large tables that were located right next to each other. It was a fine meal and the adults were drinking ceremonial sake while the children had tea. Hinata had taken a tiny sip of sake for the ceremony but was now drinking tea as were Misaki and Aoi, Shinzou's very pregnant wives. Kushina was extremely surprised to see Anko also drinking tea as well.

"Anko I'm surprised that you're not having any sake." Kushina commented. "I would normally expect you to have had at least a couple bottles by now."

She was seated to Shinzou's right like always. His other two wives were seated to his left. Anko gave her husband a quick glance and he gave her just the slightest of nods. Anko smiled over in Kushina's direction. "I've decided to give up drinking alcohol for awhile."

Kushina quirked an eyebrow. Restraint was not something she'd come to expect from Anko. "Well, I think that's a fine decision. How long is awhile?"

Anko had a huge grin. "Oh, about eight and half months."

Everyone at the table stopped what they were doing and stared at her. Misaki and Aoi looked not only shocked but very unhappy as well.

Kushina for her part was just staring in total disbelief. "Are you pregnant?"

Anko laughed and gave her husband a kiss. "Yeah, he knocked me up good."

Kushina turned her glare on her brother. "What the hell were you thinking?"

Shinzou gave his sister an innocent look. "What? I thought my job was to have children, and she is my wife."

Kushina quickly downed the cup in front of her and then poured herself another one. "I think I'm going to need a lot more sake."

---

Following the meal the band began playing and people began to dance. Naruto and Hinata had the first dance of course but soon others had joined them.

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"So do you think our wedding will be like this?" Haku asked as he held his dear one close.

Gabrella smiled and put her head on his shoulder as they slow danced. "I doubt it will be quite this grand, but I know it will be wonderful."

"I want to give you the wedding you want." Haku spoke seriously. "I want you to be happy."

"I will be Haku, just as long as you're the one I marry."

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Tayuya had sucked down ten or eleven little bottles of sake, she had lost count. As she was leaning against the bar and feeling no pain. From where she was she had a nice clear view of the dance floor. There were her teammates dancing close to each other. *The happy fucking couple, I guess the stupid bitch was smart enough not to let him go.* With her alcohol soaked mind she thought how unfair it was that some girls got everything. Some girls really did get it all, they were born rich, beautiful, and with a powerful blood line. And as if all that weren't enough they also seemed to get the best guys.

"Fuckin' princess," she muttered drunkenly.

"What?" Kiba asked blankly. He'd stayed nearby drinking with her. "You say something?"

"Dance with me." She staggered a couple steps away from the bar.

"What?" Kiba asked dumbly.

She reached back and grabbed him around the collar yanking him forward. "I said come dance with me you stupid fuck."

---

She got him out to the dance floor. She then leaned into him and they began to lurch about not really in time to the music. Kiba was happy to get his arms around her and feel her close. He liked the smell of her, the look of her, and the feel of her. He let his hands slide down from her back to a spot a bit lower. He was already more than a little warm from all the booze but now he was feeling much hotter.

"You're really beautiful." He said simply.

She looked up into his blank gaze and laughed. "You're fuckin' drunk."

"So are you," he answered. "And you're still really, really beautiful."

She looked at his face; he was way too drunk to hide anything. She could see that he wanted her and wanted her badly. The fact he was grabbing her ass was also a sign of that. Normally she would shut him down, and possibly hurt him. But at the moment she wanted to be wanted. She slid her hands into his shirt and let her fingers slowly dance across his chest; she could see him shake a bit at the feel of her touch. She put her face next to his and her lips by his ear.

"Kiba, wanna know a secret?" She whispered teasingly.

"What?" he grunted.

She whispered slowly and thickly. "I used to care about this boy named Sakon. I wanted to make him happy and he would ask me to do all these *nasty* little things to him. I would make him *very* happy." She laughed and she could feel him shiver again.

---

Yugito stood near the dance floor watching the couples dance. She had received a few requests for a dance but had turned them down. The truth was being a guest at a wedding was not a situation she was used to. She wasn't completely comfortable in social situations like this, but it felt kind of nice.

Out on the dance floor Naruto was having a dance with his mother while Hinata danced with her father. She admired the ease with which he moved on the dance floor. She had him practice the sword just about every morning and could see those moves transferred to the dance floor. She couldn't help but wonder what it would feel like to dance with him, even just once.

But as much of a stranger as she was to social customs she still knew better than to go up to the groom and ask for a dance. Except for this one short interlude all his dances were reserved for his wife.

She wasn't jealous; she actually liked Hinata a great deal. It was obvious just how deeply the two of them loved each other. Hinata made him very happy and she would never do anything to interfere

with that. She knew she could never act on these feelings inside of her. But she was glad for the feelings, and for the foolish little dreams they inspired.

---

The dancing continued into the late evening. Most of the guests remained to enjoy the food, drink, and music. Before too long the happy couple excused themselves and took refuge inside their home.

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Inside their room Hinata's wedding kimono had been carefully put away. She had washed away the make up and let her hair down. As she stepped into her husband's embrace she had on nothing but a simple undershirt.

"This has been the happiest day of my life." She sounded absolutely content.

Naruto chuckled as he gave her a kiss. "Does that mean it is all downhill from here?"

She giggled. "Of course not silly, from now on we get to live our lives together as a family. It's what I've always dreamed of Naruto-kun and there's nothing I want more."

He nodded, but looked just a bit sad. "I'm sorry we can't have a honeymoon."

"Oh, I understand. You're the Hokage after all. But as long as we're both in the village I'll get to see you and that's enough for me."

Outside they could hear and see the fireworks beginning.

Naruto had a reminiscent grin. "You know Sarutobi told me once that a Hokage's life should be like a fireworks display, a slow and majestic rise until reaching a peak and then a magnificent and glorious sight... before fading away."

Something about his words gave Hinata just a tiny feeling of dread. She looked at her husband and squeezed him tight. "You have only just begun your ascent Naruto-kun."

Nodding he leaned down and kissed his wife passionately, as outside the fireworks blossomed, and disappeared.

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The next morning.

She woke up with a splitting headache and a parched throat. She was just sitting up when she noticed a warm body lying next to her. She opened her blood shot eyes and saw Kiba lying in her bed. He was asleep but there was a grin on his face. It took her another moment to realize that they were both completely naked.

She groaned and shut her eyes. "Oh fuck me."

## One to go

The next two months lacked any great crises or desperate missions. Following their wedding Hinata was assigned full time to the hospital where she would work at least until after her pregnancy was complete. Naruto was also staying put in the village as no missions requiring the Hiraishin came up. So he concentrated on his duties as Hokage and on developing two new jutsus. He was disappointed at the lack of fresh intelligence concerning Akatsuki. Jiraiya sent him reports that were lacking anything substantial. There were vague rumors, but nothing really concrete. Jiraiya had suggested scouting Ame. Naruto in turn suggested turning the bath houses into grocery stores.

This was not to suggest that nothing of importance happened.

At the beginning of August, within ten days of each other, Misaki and then Aoi each gave birth to a healthy son. Shinzou decided to let each wife choose the name of the child.

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"Keishi," Misaki said happily. "His name is Keishi." The three of them were alone in her hospital room and Misaki was enjoying this rare monopoly on her husband's attention.

Shinzou looked at his new born son. The little guy was sleeping peacefully in his arms. It was amazing and humbling to him to have a son. During his long years in the granite quarry he had given up all hope on ever becoming a father. Now he was holding his little boy. Kooky had told him what it had felt like the first time she'd held Naruto. Now he understood, he loved his son completely and with his whole heart. But he could already see that there would be complications.

"Are you sure you want to name him that?" Shinzou smiled and spoke with a light hearted tone. "I'm not sure that's the best name. It



has many different meanings, a lot of them not so good. It can mean 'despise' or 'ignore' or 'neglect.'"

Misaki frowned. "Are you the sort of man who would treat his son in such a manner?"

"Never! I will love and take care of all of my children!"

"I see," Misaki couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice. "I suppose you only despise, ignore, and neglect your wives then."

Shinzou looked at her in honest surprise. "What are you talking about? I have always treated you and Aoi well haven't I?"

"You are never cruel and always polite. I admit that. But then again you are just as polite to the servants. If a stranger saw us together he might think me your servant, but never your wife."

Shinzou frowned. "You can't complain about that now. I have never lied to you about what I wanted or expected. I never told you that I loved you, only that I would take care of you."

"I know that," she said bitterly. "But I still thought you might share my bed on occasion." She looked at him pleadingly. "Am I so ugly to you that you find just sleeping with me repulsive?"

"No! It's nothing like that. You're a beautiful woman, and I am fond of you."

"Fond of me?" She repeated dully. "Yes, that's fair. You are fond of me as you might be fond of an old pair of slippers."

As he gently rocked the baby back and forth in his arms he spoke in a calm but serious voice. "You were not tricked into this Misaki. The prenuptial agreement, the discussions with your parents and with the Hokage, you knew from the start what this was. You were not some helpless child being forced into an arranged marriage. I wanted children and you wanted a husband and the security of being part of

a clan. That was the bargain we made and I cannot see how you can condemn me when I have lived up to my part of it."

Misaki paused a moment but then asked with a quiet voice. "Why do you love her so much?" There was pain and hurt in her voice, and more than a little jealousy too.

They both knew which *her* she meant. "Honestly? I don't really know, I just do."

She looked at him and slowly nodded. "I can understand that. I know what it's like to fall in love with someone without planning to."

Her meaning was plain. Shinzou looked at her and simply didn't know how to answer. She was a good woman, and he really did like her. But he didn't feel anything more than that. Perhaps his son was able to sense his father's distress as he picked that moment to begin crying.

Misaki held out her arms. "Here, give him to me." Shinzou handed the boy over to his mother who gently held him close as she sang him a lullaby. Soon their baby was fast asleep again.

Shinzou stood there and smiled at the sight of his son peacefully asleep in his mother's arms. "You're going to be a wonderful mother."

She smiled weakly and nodded. "Thank you, I am glad you think me good for something at least."

"Misaki..."

"You're right that, 'keishi' has more than one meaning. For instance it can also mean 'heir' or 'successor.'"

Shinzou began to look extremely uncomfortable. "He was born less than two hours ago. You don't honestly expect me to name him my heir do you?"

She frowned. "Of course I do, he is your first born son. By all tradition he *should* be clan heir."

But Shinzou shook his head. "That may be the tradition in Konoha but not in Whirlpool."

"My husband, the hitai-ite you wear bears the leaf symbol and you *are* in Konoha."

"When Tsunade granted me the right to reestablish my clan she promised me that I could keep all the Uzumaki clan traditions. There are a great many of them. One being that the Uzumaki do not name heirs until they are old enough to be ninja."

"Naruto was always clan heir. Kushina did not wait until he graduated the academy."

Shinzou shook his head. "My sister was acting as head of the Namikaze clan, and besides Naruto was her only child. Designating him clan heir was a matter of course. I on the other hand am going to have to make an actual choice. I won't do that until my children have become ninja and I know which of them I want to lead."

She looked away from him feeling bitterly disappointed. "You just want an excuse to make *her* child your heir."

"No," he said flatly. "I want whichever of my children is best suited to lead the clan. And I won't know that for many years yet." He sighed. "Is there any chance you would reconsider his name?"

She shook her head. "You told me I could choose his name. His name is Keishi. Or do you plan on going back on your word?"

But he simply shook his head feeling defeated. "I never go back on my word, for that is my nindo, my ninja way."

---

The first year students were all gathered at the academy yard. They were sitting on fold out chairs next to the family members who had brought them. This was a welcoming ceremony, tomorrow would be their first day at the academy. There was an eager buzz as children and adults talked to each other. One girl with light blue hair looked over to one light brown.

"Fumi," the blue haired girl called out.

The girl looked over at her. "What is it Miko?"

"Have you heard? The Hokage's little sister is supposed to be coming here today."

Fumi rolled her eyes. "I bet it's just a story. I mean no way would the Hokage's sister be coming here. I bet she has all sorts of special trainers."

"No she wouldn't!" Miko lifted her chin and tried to sound very wise. "I know for a fact that the Hokage used to be a student here. Niisan was in a class two years behind his and saw him plenty of times."

Fumi waved that away. "I still say the Red Death would never let anyone teach her daughter."

Miko suddenly sat straight and looked frightened. "You're not supposed to say her name out loud."

Fumi smiled and rolled her eyes again. "I don't believe those silly stories. Here, Red Death, Red Death."

"You said her name three times!" Miko looked around as though expecting someone to suddenly appear.

Fumi laughed at her immature friend. "And see? Nothing happened."

There was a sudden stir. "Oh look, the Hokage is coming, and his mother is with him too." A nearby adult voice said.

The two girls looked in the same direction as most of the other people present. Sure enough, there was the Rokudaime and he was holding the hand of a little girl who was wearing a black body suit with a stripe of red along the side. On the little girl's other side was a woman in the same type of clothing with long red hair, a sword on her back, and a hitai-ite with the image of a whirlpool.

"See! I told you not to say her name three times!" Miko sounded on the verge of panic.

Fumi didn't say a word but the blood drained from of her face.

As she watched the Hokage patted the top of the girl's head and then walked towards the podium with a blonde kunoichi trailing a few steps behind. But what the Hokage was doing barely registered. What Fumi saw was Namikaze Kushina, the Red Death, moving in **her** direction. Fumi immediately looked away and tried to shrink in her seat. She forced her eyes to look straight ahead and nowhere else.

*Don't draw her attention, don't draw her attention, don't draw her attention,* Fumi repeated the mantra again and again inside her mind and prayed desperately she could somehow avoid notice.

"Excuse me but are these seats taken?"

She couldn't help it. She looked up towards the friendly sounding voice. And not more than a few feet away was a smiling face with red hair and a foreign hitai-ite.

"Please don't kill me!" Fumi screamed and then began to cry.

---

The next day.

Alysa found an empty table and sat down to have lunch. Most of the other students were looking at her and whispering to one another. With a sigh she began having the special ramen kaasan had made

for her. Her first day at the academy was not going as she'd expected. To begin with everyone else in her class had been together for three years. They all knew each other and they all saw her as the, 'new kid.'

Add to that she was related to not only the Hokage but to, 'Red Death.' What had happened yesterday had been very upsetting as that stupid girl had caused a scene for no reason. She couldn't believe that anyone could think such things of her mother. Big brother gave his welcoming address but the moment had been ruined. Being fourth year students none of her classmates had been there but the story had spread like wild fire.

About the only good thing that had happened at the academy so far was when Iruka-sensei had administered the entrance test. She smiled proudly recalling how impressed he'd been with her, especially her taijutsu. Uncle, grand uncle, and kaasan had drilled Crane style into her over the summer. Hinata had been nice enough to take the time to show her a few jyuken moves that could be incorporated. Niisan helped her with using feints to take an opponent unaware. Haku had worked with her on throwing objects with both accuracy and speed. Gabrella had shown her blocks and counters. While Anko... well, she wasn't sure when she would use low level torture techniques but she appreciated the time. Tayuya wasn't one for taijutsu but was teaching her all about genjutsu.

The end result was a fighting style that was a bastardization of Crane with various other moves incorporated into it. Iruka had been very impressed and assured her she would do very well in the weekly spars. Her academic knowledge had always been fine and she could already perform the henge so there was no problem with chakra manipulation. She had easily passed the entrance exam. Now if only she could do something about being a social outcast.

"Excuse me?"

Alysa was brought out of her thoughts by a young girl standing in front of her with a tray. The girl had pale eyes that were a different

shade from Hinata's, dark hair that went down to her shoulders, and a seal on her forehead. She was obviously a cadet branch member of the Hyuga. "Uh, yes?"

The girl nodded to her politely. "My name is Hyuga Erena. May I sit with you?"

"Sure." Alysa replied. "My name is Namikaze Alysa."

As she sat down Erena grinned. "I know, I've heard about you from Hinata." The girl's lips began to twitch as though she wanted to laugh. "Is it true you put the Hokage's hair in braids?"

Alysa smiled. "Well he wasn't the Hokage then, but yes. I thought it was a good look for him."

Maybe the first day wouldn't be so bad after all.

---

He was lead through the back entrance of what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse. Once they were inside his guide took him to well hidden door. They began to descend a long flight of stairs.

Sai looked at him with that odd fake smile. "Thank you for agreeing to this meeting. My master appreciates your trust in him."

Riyuki shook his head. "I don't trust him, but I am willing to listen to what he has to say."

At the bottom of the stairwell he was led to a large conference room. Seated at a long table were three people. They stood and bowed to him, Riyuki returned the gesture.

"Thank you Sai, you are dismissed for now."

Sai bowed. "Hai, Danzo-sama." He exited the room.

Riyuki slowly approached the table. "It is not often I meet with three other Council members in secret." Danzo looked completely at

peace while Koharu and Homura seemed to be ill at ease. Riyuki sat down at the table. "Why have you asked me here?"

"For now," the old ninja said. "I wish only to talk."

"And just what should we talk about?" Riyuki asked politely.

"Let us speak of the future, and of what is best for Konoha."

---

Outside the warehouse a hidden figure carefully slipped away.

---

Yamato stood in the Hokage's office in his ANBU gear and mask. He had just made an oral report and also handed Naruto a document with a hundred and nine names on it. Naruto was looking the names over and carefully committing them to memory.

"I didn't realize Root had grown so large." Naruto said quietly.

"Officially there are only sixty members in Danzo's department. I turned up the other names in my investigation. These other ninja have acted consistently in Danzo's interest even though they have no obvious ties to Root."

"They're Danzo's personal spies within the ANBU. Just great." With a simple jutsu he set the list on fire and it was gone. "Can you tell me if the list is complete?"

Yamato shook his head. "I am sorry Hokage-sama, but there is simply no way to know."

Naruto nodded. "And now Riyuki, Koharu, and Homura are all together talking somewhere I can't see." Sarutobi had been able to use a crystal ball to personally spy out the happenings anywhere in the village. Naruto would have paid almost any price for the ability. Unfortunately he didn't know that particular jutsu. "Is there any way we could put surveillance equipment in his headquarters?"



Yamato again shook his head. "I wouldn't want to try it, that place is too well guarded. Besides knowing Danzo he probably sweeps for surveillance devices regularly. If he found something he would know he was under suspicion."

Naruto was silent for a moment. "You know what? I should just call the four of them into my office and ask them. It would be worth it just to see the look on their faces." Even though he had a mask on Naruto could tell Yamato was blanching. "I'm just kidding."

"This is nothing to joke about. Root and the Uchiha clan plotting is extremely serious."

"I know that. The problem is I don't know what the hell to do about it. If they were foreign nin I'd have them killed or sent to Ibiki. If I had any evidence against them I'd have them arrested. As it is if I move against them without any evidence of their guilt half the village would be up in arms."

"Treason is treason no matter who commits it." Yamato said flatly.

"Oh I agree, but if I have the head of the Uchiha clan or one of our most respected ANBU leaders arrested without proof people will think it's personal. Even worse, they might think I'm making a bid to eliminate opposition to gain more power."

"A hands mission could solve this." Yamato said quietly.

Naruto shook his head. "I am not going to start ordering assassinations within this village. I am not going to become like the Tsuchikage. Whatever happens I will deal with it like a Hokage."

Beneath the ANBU mask Yamato frowned. "Can I at least ask to bring Kakashi-sempai into the investigation?"

Naruto shook his head. "No, as of right now you, me, and Jiraiya are the only ones who know about this. I want to keep it that way for now."

"Don't you trust Kakashi?" Yamato sounded surprised.

"I trust niisan with my life, same as with my mother or Hinata or Shikamaru. It has nothing to do with trust. Danzo and Riyuki are both very intelligent and Danzo is especially cautious when it comes to security. The more people investigating the more likely it is to be noticed. For right now I prefer to rely on you."

"Hai Hokage-sama."

---

Outside his office window it began to rain. Naruto noticed and thought things looked miserable.

---

Hundreds of miles away it was also raining.

Soshaku approached the bodies of the two ninja he'd just killed. They'd had on black cloaks with red clouds. He supposed they were the 'Akatsuki' that the Hokage had warned him about. He was willing to admit they were probably more powerful than Iwa hunter nins. But lightning killed them like anyone else. He stood over their lifeless charred corpses.

"You should have just left me alone."

Suddenly the one with the mask lifted his arm and it shot out. The arm's hand gripped Soshaku's neck tight. "Now Hidan!" Kakuzu shouted.

To Soshaku's horror the other, 'body' suddenly jumped up to his feet. He threw a weird three bladed scythe that cut deep into his right thigh.

Hidan retrieved his weapon with a laugh. "You're fucked." He licked the blood off one of the blades. "Now I'll begin the ritual."

Howling Soshaku finally tore off the hand's iron grip and leap back. He was suddenly scared. He had never before run into anyone who could survive multiple lightning strikes. He let the red chakra flow around him. His body began transforming. He didn't like resorting to this, the transformation was always painful and when he did this he always wound up eating whatever he killed. He howled at the pain. Hair began to cover him, his bones cracked as he grew a foot taller, his muscles hardened and expanded, his mouth jutted forward and his eyes sloped back, his teeth sharpened and his hands were claws. In short order he'd turned himself into a monster, a very hungry monster.

"You survived my lightning," he spoke in a bestial growl. "Can you survive being torn apart?"

Usually, when he said that even the most hardened ninja would run for their lives or begin begging for mercy, he had never before been laughed at. The one with the scythe had changed his look. His face was now mostly black and he seemed to be standing within a ritual circle. He took a long metal spike out. "You've been a fucking bad boy." He drove the spike into his own chest. "Now play dead."

Soshaku was about to leap when it suddenly felt as though someone had stabbed him through the heart. He spat out blood and staggered a couple steps forward before pitching to the ground unconscious. The red chakra disappeared and his body soon transformed back to human.

Kakuzu quickly checked to make sure he was still alive. Kakuzu nodded. "We got him, the leader should be very happy."

"Whatever," Hidan said without interest. "Now I must perform the ritual and beg Jashin's forgiveness for not killing the stupid fuck."

Kakuzu repressed a sigh, so far as he was concerned the ritual was nothing but a waste of time. But he knew better than to try and argue about it. He sat down and relaxed.

---

Three days later.

Soshaku's lifeless corpse was discarded and dropped to the ground.  
Pein's astral image nodded.

"Seven down one to go."

# The life and times of Yugito

Thirteen years ago.

The five year old girl stood rigidly at attention. She had just woken up and was dressed in a simply grey night shirt. She stood barefoot on the cold stone floor. She was cold and still tired, but she knew better than to say anything. In front of her was the man who controlled her every waking moment. He decided everything for her, from what she would wear to what she would eat to when she would be allowed to go outside.

Junsaku-sensei was dressed in his normal ANBU armor and uniform. And as he normally did he had on his mask. All the ANBU had masks in the form of demons or monsters. Junsaku's mask was of a red devil with a frowning mouth and two small horns. She thought it fitting as he never seemed to ever be in a happy mood.

"What are you?" he asked, beginning the morning ritual.

"A weapon." She replied without a second's thought. She was so used to this she could have spoken his lines as well as her own without missing a beat.

"What is your purpose?"

"To strike down enemies."

"Who do you serve?"

"The Raikage and the village hidden within the clouds."

"Would you die in the service of the Raikage and this village?"

"Yes, for I live only to serve and protect the Raikage and the village."

"Do you fear death?"

"No, for death is no more than a part of life. It is as natural to die as it is to be born."

"What is it you fear then?"

"Failure and dishonor."

"Are you happy?"

Her mouth opened and suddenly snapped shut again. He had never asked that before!

"Well?" There was annoyance in his voice but she could not read anything else.

She swallowed. "Forgive me Junsaku-sensei, but I do not know how I am supposed to answer that question. I have not been instructed."

Junsaku-sensei shook his head slightly. "That is because it is a genuine question. I am not looking for a scripted reply but for information. You need only answer the question truthfully."

She looked at him nervously. "Will I be punished if I give the wrong answer?"

He shook his head slightly. "For this sort of question there is no right or wrong answer. You may give one answer today and a different one tomorrow and both would be correct so long as they were each the truth at the time. Do you understand?"

She nodded ever so slightly. "I think so."

There was a long pause.

"Well then, are you happy?"

She thought about it very carefully. Not about whether or not she was actually happy, the answer to that was always no. But rather she tried to piece together what he wanted her to answer. She knew he

was lying when he said there was no right or wrong answer. Just as she knew no one cared whether she was happy or not. Everything in her life was a test. Every action and every word was watched and judged. A fact that had forced to develop a sharp mind and even sharper senses.

She made her decision and nodded. "Yes Junsaku-sensei, I am happy."

He nodded once in acknowledgement and gave no other reaction. "You have forty five minutes to wash yourself and dress. I have already set aside the clothes you will be wearing. I expect you to be seated at the table for breakfast in exactly forty five minutes." He made a hand sign and disappeared in a swirl of wind and fog.

Sighing she got moving to the bathroom, another day had begun.

---

Twelve years ago.

The six year old was walking through the streets of the village a couple steps behind Junsaku-sensei. On the roof tops and side streets two full squads of ANBU kept watch on their progress while trying to remain discreet. They were all but invisible to the villagers but with her vision and sense of smell she had no trouble keeping track of them. She was allowed to train outside in the compound daily, but actually going through the village was a rarity.

Everyone knew who she was. As she and her sensei came down the street people *ran* to the other side. All conversations came to an abrupt halt as people stopped to stare at her. Their looks held curiosity and surprise and distaste, but above all they looked at her with fear.

"Junsaku-sensei," she spoke quietly.

He did not break his stride but turned his head back to her a little. "Yes?"

"Why is everyone afraid of me?"

She couldn't see his face of course, but somehow she got the sense that he looked uncomfortable. "People will always fear what they do not understand. That is human nature." Before she could ask what exactly he meant by that he turned away and picked up his pace a bit. "Come, we cannot keep the Yondaime Raikage waiting."

---

Standing in the reception area everyone around her tried to pretend she wasn't there. They weren't very good at it. She could see the secretaries and other civilians constantly glancing and then looking away. Normally with the ANBU there was always a trace amount of fear scent, even with Junsaku-sensei. Here the stink of fear was so thick she thought she might begin to choke on it. It was actually a relief to see the Raikage's office door open and Junsaku motioning her to come.

As she approached the door Junsaku bent down and whispered in her ear. "Behave exactly as I showed you, and do not speak unless spoken to."

Her answer was a quick and silent nod. She strode in the office and came to a stop five feet in front of the Raikage's desk. She gave him a deep and very respectful bow. "ANBU trainee Nii Yugito reporting as ordered Raikage-sama."

He gave a slight nod in acknowledgement. Sitting behind his desk he carefully looked her over. Whatever he was thinking he hid it well. He had a lot of fear scent. His lips were turned down, but that didn't surprise her. People rarely smiled around her.

"So you are Yugito," the Raikage said neutrally. "You are a very special little girl. Do you know *why* you are special?"

She noticed Junsaku stiffen just a bit. "No Raikage-sama," she answered truthfully.



Again the Raikage seemed to study her. He came to a decision. "You are aware of the seal written on your back?"

"Hai Raikage-sama."

"You are what is known as a, 'jinchuuriki.' That seal was placed on you on the day of your birth so that a powerful demon could be locked inside you."

And with those few words all semblance or order left her world. "What?" She felt a sudden mounting terror. Horrid images of a monster tearing her apart from the inside out filled her mind.

"You hold within you a demon," the Raikage repeated with great patience. "To be precise you hold the two tailed demon cat, Nibi. Because of this you will one day have great power. Power you will use in service to this village."

Despite her shock her discipline held, if only just barely. "Hai Raikage-sama."

---

She was sitting on her bed with her knees drawn up and her arms wrapped around them. She was shaking and she was crying. She had a monster inside of her. A monster that had been put in her *on purpose*, she was so scared.

There was a single knock and the door opened. Junsaku never asked or needed permission to enter her quarters. Even the knock was just done out of courtesy. Junsaku entered and shut the door behind him. He strode over to her bed and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Why are you crying?" He asked sharply. "You are being taught to be ninja. For a ninja to cry is shameful. What is the twenty fifth rule of ninja conduct?"

Yugito quickly wiped her eyes and tried to bring her crying to a stop. "No matter what happens true shinobi must never show their emotions. The mission is the only priority. Carry that in you heart and never shed a tear."

"So stop your crying." He sat down on the edge of her bed. "You have no cause for tears."

Her head snapped back up so she could stare at his mask. "What?! I have a demon inside me!" She could feel the panic rising up in her.

Junsaku sighed and reached up to pull off his devil mask. The face he revealed was not a handsome one. It was the face of a man in his fifties who had seen and done many things and survived. His nose was large and stubby and his chin seemed to jut out too far. Wrinkles covered his face and there was a small scar just beneath his left eye. His hair was mostly grey but still with some blonde. The eyes were a surprise. They were a beautiful grayish blue. They held a startling clarity, as though nothing could ever fool them. When Junsaku-sensei looked at her without the mask on she was always drawn to his eyes and always felt they could see straight through to her heart.

"So?" He asked calmly. "That was true yesterday as well. It has been true for your entire life. All that has changed is that you are now aware of it."

Thinking about it that way did help a little, but only a little. "What will happen to me? What will the demon do to me?"

"Nothing," he said. "So long as the seal is active and you do not voluntarily choose to release the Nibi the demon cannot harm or control you." A look of worry crossed his face. "Though it seems likely the demon will be able to talk to you."

"Talk to me?" She had images of a huge scaly beast with sharp claws and a mouth filled with pointy teeth hulking over her.

Junsaku nodded. "That is right; the demon will be able to speak to you within your mind. You may expect all sorts of threats and demands that you release the seal. But keep in mind that the demon *cannot* harm or control you unless you allow it to."

"It can't hurt me?" She sounded doubtful.

"It cannot." Junsaku said firmly. "The demon is the prisoner and you are its jailer. It would have been pointless to implant the demon in you if it were to control you."

"Why was it?" She asked. "Why was this done to me?"

He tried not to show it, but his eyes held sympathy for her and she could smell his concern. "It was done so that you could one day use the demon's power to protect the village. You know that in the Third Great Ninja war that much of our country was over run and this village nearly destroyed?" She nodded, she knew all about her village's history. "It is to make sure that such a thing can never happen again that the Nibi was placed into you. Surviving in this world demands strength and sacrifice. All Lightning nin are expected to make whatever sacrifice is required for the good of the village. In that Yugito you are no different than me or any other ninja. We are all tools in the service of the Raikage and the village."

She slowly nodded. "I understand," she said quietly. "I am a weapon and I live only to serve." She looked at him questioningly. "Will the people I protect always be afraid of me?"

"Yes," he told her truthfully. "I told you that it was human nature to always fear what one does not understand. But perhaps in time some of them will lose their fear of you."

"Will you?" she asked longingly.

He saw her pain and reached out a hand to try and comfort her. But before he touched her he stopped.

She understood. "I see," she looked away from him. She could smell his fear, it was faint, but it was there.

He quickly put his mask back on and stood up. "I know this has been hard for you, but I still expect you to behave like a future ANBU operative. No more tears. A ninja crying is a disgrace."

She nodded but refused to look at him. "I understand sensei."

"Very well, you may have the rest of the day to yourself." With that he quickly departed.

When she turned back around he was gone. On her bed were ten boxes of strawberry pocky. Despite everything she smiled a little. Pocky was her favorite thing in the world. Whenever she did really well in a lesson or in training Junsaku would reward her with a box. He had never given her more than a single box at a time though. Having him lavish so much of the delicious treat on her at once seemed almost decadent. She tore open one of the boxes and took out one of the thin bread sticks with strawberry icing. She was smiling because she was getting to have a whole lot of her precious pocky.

She was also smiling because this was Junsaku-sensei's way of saying he cared without ever saying it.

---

"What are you?"

"A weapon."

"What is your purpose?"

"To strike down enemies."

"Are you happy?"

---

Eleven years ago.

She was in a large underground chamber. A massive containment seal had been drawn up on the floor in the shape of a circle. The symbols glowed with a cheerful green energy. All around the perimeter of the seal sat eight ANBU carefully maintaining the seal. She sat in a wooden chair at the very center of the seal with Junsaku-sensei.

"Try it once more." Junsaku told her.

"Hai sensei." She shut her eyes and concentrated. Nine sets of eyes watched her nervously.

She reached down into her self and tried to draw out the power. She found it, hidden somewhere deep inside. But bringing it out was difficult, like drawing water from a very deep well. Nevertheless she had her orders and so tried.

Like the others in the room he felt it, just the tiniest flicker of that power. From out of her hands and arms a tiny film of red chakra began oozing out. Only suddenly to disappear as quickly as it had come.

She opened her eyes and let out a weary breath. "I'm sorry Junsaku-sensei. But that's as much as I can do."

"I see," Junsaku frowned. "Perhaps we're going about this the wrong way. Even after all these months of training you're still barely able to scratch the surface of your potential. Let us try something different. I want you to take on a meditative state and see if you can contact the demon." There were gasps not only from her but from the other ANBU as well.

"You want me to talk to the demon?"

He nodded. "I do. It is in the demon's own interest to give you power. If you appeal to its own sense of self preservation it may be willing to

aid you."

She looked extremely nervous. "But what if..."

"The demon cannot hurt you Yugito. There is no reason to not make the attempt."

She swallowed. "Hai Junsaku-sensei."

---

She let herself fall deeply into the meditative state.

She found herself in a peaceful forest. The air was thick with the scent of flowers and other plants. The sky above her was a tranquil blue without a cloud anywhere. In spite of the idyllic scene she looked about nervously wondering if somewhere in the forest the demon was watching her.

"Meow."

She looked down to see a little grey house cat looking up at her with green eyes. Around the cat's neck was a leather collar.

"Oh! What an adorable kitty!" She immediately picked the cat up and soon had the cat held with one arm against her chest as she pet the cat with her other hand. The cat soon had eyes closed and was purring, sounding very content.

She leaned down and rubbed her cheek against the top of the cat's head. The fur was so soft. Looking closely she noticed the leather collar.

"Do you belong to someone?"

The cat opened both eyes and looked up at her.

She laughed. "Well since this isn't real I guess you belong to me. I think I'll call you Precious."

**My name is Nibi.**

"Ahhhh!!" She screamed and immediately dropped the cat. She leapt back about ten feet and pulled out a kunai.

The cat meanwhile landed on all four feet. Nibi turned in her direction and sat down. What had seemed like a single tail turned out to be two. Both tails curled around Nibi's paws as the cat calmly watched the terrified girl. **Is something wrong?**

"You're the demon!" She cried out.

The cat's head tilted a bit. **Well of course I am. Who else would I be?**

Yugito stood there eying this seemingly harmless cat while still holding her kunai. "Are you going to try and eat me?"

**I have eaten humans, but I don't really like them, too fatty. I like fish.**

"All right," this wasn't what she had expected. "Since you're a demon do you plan on hurting me?"

**No, why would I hurt you?**

"Because you're a demon."

**Yes we have established that. I am a demon, now why do you think I would hurt you?**

She stared at the cat that was staring at her. She found the whole situation very, very bizarre. "Isn't that what demons do?"

**Humans.** She could hear playful laughter. **For such short lived and fragile creatures you really believe you know everything don't you?** There was more laughter. **Listen carefully, not all demons are alike. Some like Kyuubi or Shukaku revel in killing and destruction. Some simply enjoy existing in their animal form. I**

**usually enjoy just being a cat, and occasionally taking vengeance on people.**

"Vengeance?" Yugito said weakly.

**That's right. I am a spirit of vengeance and I enjoy bloody revenge upon those who have committed some terrible wrong. I also really like just lying out in the sun.**

"I see, so are you going to take vengeance on me for holding you prisoner?"

**No, you had no choice in that. You are as much of a victim as I am.**

"So what happens now?"

**Well you could remove my collar.**

Despite the strange situation Yugito's mind was still sharp. "The collar, it symbolizes the seal that holds you doesn't it?"

**That's right.**

Yugito shook her head. "In that case I'm afraid I can't remove it. My main duty to the Raikage and the village is to keep you imprisoned.

**Hmmm, well in that case can you pet me?**

Yugito shook her head not believing any of this. The terrible and evil demon that everyone was so scared of wanted to be petted. "You want me to pet you?"

**Well of course. I enjoy it.**

Deciding this had to be the strangest moment in her very strange life she nodded and put the kunai away. "All right." She came over, knelt down and began petting the fearsome demon Nibi. The cat began to



purr happily. "Since you don't seem to want to harm me can I ask you something?"

**I will allow you to use my chakra.**

"How did you..."

Yugito heard more good natured laughter. **We share the same body and mind through the seal. Everything you know I know. And just to save time, no I can't hurt or control you unless you allow it, and yes, when you die I die so I will do whatever I can to protect you.**

"Thank you Nibi."

**You are welcome Yugito.**

---

She opened her eyes and smiled up at her sensei. "I did it, I talked to Nibi."

The other ANBU began whispering to each other. Junsaku merely nodded. "And what did it say?"

"Her."

"What?"

"The Nibi," she explained. "Is a girl. She said I could use her chakra and that she would try and protect me."

"I see." Junsaku said neutrally. "Well in that case why don't you try and draw the demon's chakra once more?"

Certain she would be able to do it this time she decided to milk the opportunity. "Sensei, if I manage to draw the red chakra can I have a special reward?" When she did especially well she would ask him for specific things as rewards.

"What would you like?" Previous requests had been for stuffed toys and her own radio and cd player.

"Will you take me through the village and buy me lunch at a restaurant?"

"Yes I will," he nodded. "But you will have to draw a noticeable amount and hold it for awhile."

"Hai sensei!" She immediately concentrated on drawing out the red chakra. Where before it had been like drawing water from a deep well now it was like standing before a geyser. The red chakra flowed out.

There were shouts of alarm from the others and even Junsaku took an involuntary step back. Little Yugito had not only drawn the red chakra, she had fully transformed into a ten foot tall mini Nibi composed of it. The sense of power and of evil was overwhelming. Junsaku had felt this only once before. Mercifully it was a mere fraction of what the demon had been able to produce.

"Are you happy sensei?" It was Yugito's voice but it had a deeper tone to it.

Junsaku quickly nodded. "Yes, very well done Yugito. The test is complete now. Please let the power go."

She immediately complied and a smiling seven year old was standing in front of him again.

---

Unlike previous trips through the village they were leaping across the roof tops. Yugito loved the village and wanted to protect it. At the same time she didn't like the way people would look at her. So she had asked to travel across the roofs rather than along the street. They remained hidden from view.

As they were passing through a neighborhood she suddenly came to a halt. Something had caught her attention. Junsaku was forced to stop as well. He was surprised to see her standing near the edge of a roof.

"What is it?"

"What are they doing?" She pointed down to a group of four girls that were near Yugito's age. Two of the girls were swinging a long rope around and around. The other two leaping up and down each time the rope approached the ground. "What sort of training is this?"

"This is not training Yugito. These children are civilians, they are simply playing."

"Playing? Do you mean like what I do with my toys?" She asked.

"That's right."

She looked at the girls. They seemed to be having a great deal of fun. As she continued to watch though one of the girls tripped as she landed and fell over. This brought the playing to a halt as the child began crying. What was worse she was crying where others could see.

"Shameful." Yugito remarked.

"Hmmm?"

"That girl is crying, it's shameful." Yugito clarified.

"She is not a ninja in training Yugito. For an ordinary child there is no shame in tears." Junsaku explained.

A woman came out of the building the children had been playing in front of. She quickly went over to the fallen girl and wrapped her arms around her. Soon the girl had stopped crying.

"What is that woman doing?" Yugito asked.

"That is called a hug. It is a way to show care and affection for someone." Junsaku answered a bit sadly.

Yugito continued to stare down at the scene. Fascinated by the sight of a mother holding her child.

---

At the restaurant people stared as the two of them entered. No one said anything directly, but as usual there were whispers. Yugito did her best to ignore them and the fear scent. She absolutely loved fish and had some baked salmon with rice. Junsaku did not eat much himself but had four small bottles of sake.

Yugito noticed. "Do you always drink so much?"

Junsaku had of course removed his mask in order to eat. She saw his annoyed expression. "You do not need to worry; it would take a lot more than this to leave me drunk."

"Why do you drink so much?"

He paused. "It is medicine for the soul." He lifted his cup to his mouth and downed it.

"Will I drink like this when I am a ninja?"

He looked at her. "Kami I hope not." He quickly refilled his cup and had another drink.

---

"What are you?"

"A weapon."

"What is your purpose?"

"To strike down enemies."

"Are you happy?"

---

Eight years ago.

They were on a wooded hill side a few miles from the village. Yugito was excited. Not only was this her initiation into the ranks of the ANBU, but it was the first time in her life she had ever been allowed outside the village. She had trained long and hard to master taijutsu, ninjutsu, weapons, and control of her demonic chakra. It had been very lonely at times. The only people she was around on a regular basis were the ANBU. They were comrades and coworkers, but not really friends. She had no friends (except perhaps Nibi.) The only person in the world she was close to was her sensei, and even that relationship had a certain distance in it.

She was eager to finally become full ANBU and a real ninja. She would be allowed to get her very own apartment and no longer be confined to ANBU headquarters most of the time. She would get to go on real missions and see the world. She would actually get to have a little bit of freedom.

Junsaku looked at her very seriously from beneath his mask. "Normally Yugito you would have had to have achieved the rank of Jonin and had years of field experience to even be considered for the ANBU." He sighed. "But you are the most special of special exceptions and so if you pass tonight's test we will welcome you into our ranks."

"I am ready for whatever test you have." Yugito said confidently.

"We will see." Junsaku looked into the darkened woods. "Bring him out!"

From out of the nearby trees came two ANBU with a chained prisoner held firmly between them. The prisoner was gagged and was looking about the clearing obviously terrified. Yugito was very surprised to see the man in ninja clothing and gear; prisoners were usually forced to wear brown sack cloth. Even more surprising she saw he had on a Mist hitai-ite.

Junsaku approached the prisoner with a key in hand. "We will give you a two minute head start. If we catch you we will kill you." He grabbed hold of the man's wrists and quickly unlocked his cuffs and chains. He then stepped quickly back. "Let him go!"

The other two ANBU released him. The man hesitated for just a second and looked about wildly, obviously thinking this some sort of trick. He quickly decided that he was wasting precious time and leapt away as fast as he could.

"Junsaku-sensei, what are you doing?"

"That man is a spy from Mist. He was captured in our territory trying to steal one of our code books. He is a Chunin and should be no match for an ANBU." He glanced at his watch. "In one minute and forty seconds you are going to go out alone and kill him."

"Kill him?" She said dully.

Junsaku turned to her. "What are you?"

"A weapon." She answered automatically.

"What is your purpose?"

"To strike down enemies." For the first time in a long while she really heard what she was saying.

"Did you think those were just words? If you really do become ANBU then a weapon is what you'll be and this is exactly the sort of mission you will be expected to carry out. You will go alone, track him down, kill him, and return his hitai-ite as proof. If you should fail we will have to call out the hunter nins to try and prevent him from making it back to Mist. And should you fail it will mean you are not ready to be a ninja."

She stood straight and gritted her teeth. "I will not fail sensei."

Junsaku looked back down at his watch. Time seemed to crawl by until after an hour or more he looked back up at her. "Go."

She leapt away and was gone.

---

Even with a full moon out she relied mostly on scent to track him. It had turned out that he was pretty fast, a bit faster than she was. He was heading west away from the village and the roads. He might have studied the geography of Lightning as he was headed into the most rugged and hilly part of the country. The terrain would give him his best chance to lose pursuit. But unfortunately for him there were no wide rivers in this part of Lightning. And even if he was faster she knew she would out last him. Her endurance was inhuman (literally) she could go days without a rest.

After three hours of going all out he was finally forced to rest. That was when she caught up to him.

---

It was almost sunrise when she finally returned. She handed a bloodied Mist hitai-ite over to her sensei without a word.

"How was it?" He asked her. He saw her look away and tremble a bit.

"Hard," she answered without detail.

"It gets easier, before long it won't bother you at all."

She looked back at him. "Really? Is that why you drink so much? Because it doesn't bother you at all?"

"I drink for many reasons. Here," he held out a lightning hitai-ite and an ANBU mask with a cat demon's image. "You are now ninja and ANBU of the village hidden within the clouds."

She took both items from him. "Thank you sensei."

"I am very proud of you Yugito."

His words made her blush with pride. "Sensei, may I ask for a special reward?"

"Yes, what would you like?"

She gave him a shy look. "A hug."

He stared back at her. "I am not the hugging sort."

"Oh," she looked down feeling foolish. "I understand."

"But how about we go back to the village and I will buy you all the pocky you want?"

She looked back up at him and smiled a bit. "All right."

---

"Are you happy?"

---

Five years ago.

Being an ANBU had not changed her life as much as she had hoped. She had her own apartment and her own money. She got to decide what she ate and what she wore and had as much freedom as any ninja. But she was still lonely most of the time. Like Gaara in Suna or Naruto in Konoha, everyone in her village knew who she was. Unlike the two of them she was never attacked or insulted or threatened. Whatever else she was, she was ANBU and you did not disrespect the ANBU. But if no one ever insulted her no one ever approached her as a friend either. Also unlike the Jinchuuriki in other villages her existence was not kept secret. The Raikage let the world know that his village possessed the power of the two tailed demon. It not only acted as a deterrent to potential enemies but brought in many high paying contracts.



Yugito was kept very busy with training and with missions. She was never assigned a team. Once in awhile she would work with Junsaku. Most of the time she was solo. She received only A and S ranked missions. Many of them involving assassination or something else of high risk and difficulty. She did not object as the missions allowed her to travel and provided her with real challenges.

In her foreign missions she had met a few interesting people and enjoyed the respite from always being feared. But she was never in any one place for more than a few days and she was not the sort of person to approach others first.

Her life was not all that she hoped for, but she was more or less satisfied. Even if she was lonely.

Then she returned from a mission to Grass to be informed Junsaku was in the hospital dying of liver failure and asking for her.

---

He had always seemed so huge to her. She had always thought of him as large and powerful, as unstoppable as a landslide. Now he was lying in a hospital bed pale and sweaty. He suddenly seemed horribly frail to her.

Despite his weakness he smiled up at her. "Hello Yugito, thank you for coming to see me."

"Sensei what happened?"

He chuckled. "All the sake over all those years finally caught up to me. The medic nins can do nothing for me. I do not have very long to live." He could see the misery in her eyes. "Do not grieve for me, I have had a full life and I do not fear death."

"Death is no more than a part of life. It is as natural to die as it is to be born." She said blankly.

He nodded. "Yes, and it is pointless to fear what must be." He took a deep breath and with some effort forced himself up into a sitting position. "But before I die there are things I must say to you. I have had many regrets Yugito, many things I have been ashamed of. And one of the things I regret most was how I treated you."

"Sensei what are you talking about? You are the only one who ever treated me well."

He shook his head sadly. "No, I could have given you love, but I was always afraid to. I have always seen it as a weakness for a ninja. And knowing what your life was going to be like I thought it best not to expose you to that. I thought it best that you learn to find satisfaction in duty and not in people. And I was afraid I did not have it in me to love a child. But now I know I was wrong."

He reached out and put his arms around her. She stiffened; she was not used to having anyone touch her. But slowly she relaxed and accepted his hug.

"All those times I asked you if you were happy and you said, 'yes' I knew you were lying. But I convinced myself that you weren't. I wanted to pretend that you weren't lonely and unhappy. I wasn't brave enough to be a father to you, and for that I beg your forgiveness."

She felt the comfort of finally being embraced by the one person she truly cared for. "I can't forgive because you never did anything wrong. I know that you cared about me even if your way of showing it was to buy me pocky. Every single time you gave me some or spent time with me I knew it was your way of showing you cared." She hesitated. "Junsaku-sensei, may I call you father?"

He smiled and nodded without letting go of her. "I would like that Yugito-chan."

"Father..." the word sounded so alien to her, but it felt wonderful to say. Despite her best effort she felt tears. She immediately felt

ashamed of showing such weakness. "Forgive me, I should not be crying."

He looked at her and then gently shook his head. "It is all right. If you feel the need to cry, then cry. I know how strong you are and it honors me to know you weep for my sake."

His comforting words only made her cry harder. She put her own arms around him and squeezed him tight. "Oh father please don't leave me!"

"I am sorry Yugito, but that is not my choice. But whatever time I have left I would like to spend with you."

---

He held on for five days. During that time she refused to leave his side. She was actually assigned an A-rank mission which she refused. In the village hidden within the clouds ninja did not have the right to refuse any mission. No one had the courage to tell her she had to go. In those five days she and her father talked and talked and talked, trying to make up for years of things that had been left unsaid. For this very short time Yugito thought she understood what it was like to be loved.

Near the very end Junsaku's skin had become almost yellowish and his pulse had slowed and he was constantly sweating and in pain. But he was ninja and kept his dignity to the very last.

"Daughter," he whispered into her ear. "I want you to be truly happy some day. You deserve that, and you deserve to be loved. Promise me something, that if you find love and happiness one day that you will not turn away from it. Not even if it conflicts with your duty."

That went directly into the teeth of everything he had taught her. But there was no way she could refuse. "I give you my solemn promise tousan, if I find love and happiness some day I will not turn from it."

With that Junsaku closed his eyes and found peace.

---

Five months ago.

She had never been to Konoha before. She arrived at the main gate where a pair of Chunin asked to see her documents. She presented them, along with a letter of invitation from the Hokage. She had no idea what the mission was or how long it would last, but she would perform it to the best of her abilities, just like always. It was not hard to figure out where the Hokage would be. The Hokage Tower being hard to miss.

In the years since Junsaku's death she had given up thoughts of finding love or happiness. For someone like her such thoughts were just foolish.

She soon arrived at the Hokage's office and was greeted by his assistant.

"The Hokage has been looking forward to meeting you." Shizune said.

"I look forward to meeting him as well." She politely lied. If he was anything like the Raikage he would be a frowning and unhappy man who was fearful and distrustful. At least the meeting would be short. She would be informed of who her client was and the nature of the mission.

Shizune waved her into the Hokage's office.

Her very first impression was shock. Standing in front of her was a teenager who really looked like he was playing dress up in the robes of state. More bizarre still he was *smiling* at her.

Well whatever her impressions he was obviously the Hokage and so she gave him a respectful bow. "I am Nii Yugito of the village hidden within the clouds. I was ordered to report to you about a long term mission."

The blonde teen stood up and returned her bow. "I am very glad to meet you Yugito; I hope we can become good friends."

Her eyebrows quirk for just a second before the calm mask returned. Friends? What sort of Kage would say such a thing? She wondered if he was some sort of an imposter playing the role as a security measure. Even if he was she couldn't call him on it. That would be rude. "Well, I suppose that is possible." She said neutrally. "Can you please inform me of who my client is and what the mission is?"

The blonde smiled. "I am your client. I gave the Raikage five million ryu of my family's money to hire you as a bodyguard for a full year."

She stared at him. "A year?" The Raikage sent me away for an entire year?

"Welcome to Konoha."

She just stared at him and got the weirdest feeling that this was going to be a very interesting mission.

## According to plan

Naruto was rather enjoying performing the wedding ceremony for his old friend and his rather troublesome bride. Temari looked quite beautiful in her white wedding kimono with her hair long and her face covered in the traditional white make up. (Though not as beautiful as his Hinata-chan.) The wedding at the Nara estate was smaller than his had been, but still pretty big with a few hundred guests attending. Asuma had been given the honor of walking Temari down the aisle. Hinata-chan had trailed behind holding up the edge of the wedding kimono. Chouji was standing next to Shikamaru and giving him moral support, while making sure he didn't make a run for it. Temari looked at Shikamaru with love and simple joy. Seeing the happiness in her face Shikamaru relaxed, he really loved her, even if she was scary.

After both of them had sipped the ceremonial sake Naruto looked out at the guests. "Can any give just cause why these two should not be joined in sacred marriage?"

There was a loud cough and all eyes turned in surprise to a certain blonde sitting in the first row.

"What?" Ino said innocently. "I had to cough."

Eyes quickly were turned back to the bride as her killer intent was suddenly raging. The fact that she was growling made some of the guests nervously check escape routes.

"Honey," Shikamaru said carefully. "Please don't kill her."

"Killing a wedding guest is a bad omen for a marriage." Yoshino pointed out helpfully.

With an act of will Temari brought her killer intent back under control. She did still send her soon to be husband a glare. " *Why* was she

invited again?"

Shikamaru sighed. "Because I have known her since we were kids, she is a friend and former teammate, my best friend's girlfriend, and my mom likes her."

"Since there is no objection," Naruto looked directly at Ino who continued looking sweet and innocent. "Why don't we continue with the ceremony?"

As tempting as it was to run inside and grab her fan Temari decided it was better to just go ahead and get married. Fortunately for the innocent bystanders nothing else out of the ordinary occurred.

With a tremendous amount of relief Naruto informed Shikamaru that he could now kiss his bride. As they kissed Naruto declared, "may I present to you Nara Shikamaru and his bride Nara Temari."

---

The Nara clan was financially well off but not immensely rich like other clans such as Namikaze, Uchiha, or Hyuga. Since Chouji was there and beef was being served at the reception it was decided having an open bar might bankrupt the clan.

Kiba was at the bar working on his second bottle of sake. Even if he had to pay he was determined to at least really enjoy himself here at the wedding reception. He had after all not had much fun at the bachelor party... again.

---

Kiba was just glaring at Chouji as he finished off his seventh plate of beef.

"You know I thought Shikamaru's bachelor party was lame but at least we had sake. Chouji this has got to be the worst bachelor party in the history of bachelor parties."

Chouji looked hurt. "You don't like the food?"

Kiba rolled his eyes. "The food's just fine but this is supposed to be a wild night with drinking and naked dancing girls."

"Don't be so troublesome Kiba," Shikamaru put in with a bored tone. "Temari threatened him about getting me drunk or having dancing girls."

Chouji shivered. "That's right."

Kiba eyed the one female who was at the private celebration. "Well maybe we could have *one* dancing girl. What do you say beautiful? Want to put on a show for us?"

In the next instant Kiba was lying on the floor clutching his bruised face and moaning in pain.

Yugito bowed to the Hokage before stalking back to her position standing guard behind him. "Forgive me Hokage-san."

Naruto shook his head. "Come on let's get him to the hospital and make sure he doesn't have a concussion."

---

Kiba would have actually fantasized about having a hot blonde attack him at a bachelor party, but not like that. Suddenly he spotted a certain red head heading towards the bar.

"Hey there beautiful."

Tayuya glared at him.

"Oh come on," Kiba grinned. "You're not still mad are you?"

---

The morning after the wedding of Naruto and Hinata.

"Oh fuck me." Tayuya said dully.



At the sound of her voice Kiba stirred a bit and opened his eyes. "I already did, twice." He was smiling up at her stunned face. "Since you're awake can you make me breakfast before we go at it again?"

There was a moment of complete quiet as she stared at him. Then...

"Ow! What the hell?" Kiba complained and began rubbing his bruised backside after Tayuya had literally kicked him out of bed.

Tayuya wrapped the blanket around her body and glared furiously at the boy sitting naked on her floor. "GET THE FUCK OUT!!"

Kiba got to his feet and began looking around for his clothes. "Damn I guess you're not the cuddling sort. Could I at least have a sandwich before I go?"

Tayuya began looking around her apartment. "Where the hell are my kunai?"

He was forced to leap out her window with nothing but his boxers on as she threw kunai at him.

"I'll call you!" Kiba shouted back as soon as he was out of range.

---

She ordered a bottle of sake before turning to look at him. "Why the fuck would I be mad? Just because the whole fucking *village* knew about it by the end of the day?"

Kiba couldn't help but laugh. "Well come on, I mean they did see you hanging all over me at the reception."

Tayuya gave him just a sliver of a smile. "You know I brought my flute with me."

Kiba suddenly paled and grabbed his bottle. "I'll see you later."

---

At the reception there was a band playing and couples dancing. Naruto and Hinata of course danced. She was about five months along and showing. Though she enjoyed dancing with her husband she decided to sit for a while. Naruto in turn decided to continue dancing with a few others (with Hinata's permission of course.) He danced with Alysa, his mom, Gabrella, Tayuya, Ino (yes, Hinata was ok with it) and even had one dance with the bride.

So Yugito should not have been surprised when he approached her with a smile and an extended hand. "Want to dance Yugito?"

Despite watching him dance with so many partners it had somehow never occurred to her that he might want to dance with her. Her heart beat picked up a bit and her cheeks darkened a couple shades.

"Thank you Naruto-san, but I've never really danced before."

Still smiling he reached out and took hold of both her hands. "Then you're way past due, come on it's not that hard." She tried to protest but did not really fight as he led her out onto the dance floor. And shortly the two of them were dancing. People did not stop to stare or begin whispering. Hinata did not run up to her to pull her away from him. They were just one couple on a crowded floor. Slowly she began to relax as she realized she really was dancing with him.

Since his wedding she had thought about how wonderful dancing with him would be. And it turned out to be every bit as enjoyable as she'd hoped. They moved together with his hands lightly upon her hips and hers resting on his shoulders. He was so graceful as he led across the dance floor.

The best part of the dancing was that she got to look into those beautiful blue eyes. He was paying attention to her, not as a body guard, but as his dance partner. She really liked his attention.

"You were trying to fool me." Naruto accused.

"What?" She had sudden panicked thoughts about him knowing about her feelings.

"You've danced before." He said happily.

She let out a relieved breath and shook her head. "No, this really is my first time. But it's not hard to follow where you lead."

"Well I thank you for your trust in me." He said lightly.

And as they continued to dance she gave him serious look. "I would trust you with my life, so trusting you in a dance is not so much."

He was a bit surprised at the solemn reply but nodded appreciatively. "Well thank you Yugito-chan."

"You're very welcome Naruto-kun."

He quirked an eyebrow and sent her a questioning look. "Naruto-kun?"

She suddenly gasped realizing what she had just said. "My apologies Hokage-san! I did not mean to be so disrespectful, please forgive me."

But Naruto simply laughed as they continued to dance. "Yugito-chan, I was just teasing. You're one of my precious people and you can call me Naruto-kun whenever you like."

She nodded carefully. "I am a... precious person?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Well of course you are, I like you and I care about you. You are precious to me."

She felt her face darken. "Thank you Naruto, that means a great deal to me. And you are very precious to me as well."

He nodded pleased. "Are you feeling all right Yugito-chan? You look sort of flushed."

She nodded quickly and reassured. "At this moment I think I feel better than I ever have."

The two continued to dance.

From a table Kushina and Hinata watched.

"Yugito seems to be enjoying herself." Kushina said carefully.

"Yes." Hinata replied.

"Perhaps just a little too much." Kushina suggested.

Hinata glance at her beloved mother in law. "I'm glad Yugito is enjoying herself. I know the two of them are good friends."

Kushina nodded and said no more.

---

Before Shikamaru and Temari could depart for their honeymoon there was one thing Temari had to take care of first.

"All you single girls get up here." Temari called out. "I'm going to throw the bouquet."

There was a rush of about a dozen young women to the floor near Temari.

As Tayuya headed up she noticed Gabrella was still seated with Haku. "Aren't you coming?"

Gabrella shook her head and patted Haku's hand. "No thanks, I already know my future."

---

At the wedding reception of Naruto and Hinata.

Hinata turned her back to the assembled girls. "Ready? Here it comes!" She tossed out the bouquet.

"Hey!"

"Ow!"

"Bitch!"

Ino, Tenten, and Tayuya glared at Gabrella as she held her hard won prize.

"You shoved me!" Ino accused.

"Me too!" Tenten rubbed her arm.

"What the fuck? You're already engaged!" Tayuya let her have it.

"Just wanted to make sure." Gabrella said happily.

---

As the girls gathered Ino, Tayuya, and Tenten eyed each other. It was a silly tradition, but the fact was silly or not they all wanted that bouquet.

Temari turned her back. "Go get it ladies!" In her excitement she threw it a bit further than she'd planned to.

Yugito had only gone up because Alysa had insisted and almost dragged her up there. Having no wish to fight with a mob of women over a bunch of silly flowers she stood to the rear at what she thought a safe distance.

And so of course when the bouquet headed straight for her face she was forced to catch it more or less in self defense. Yugito found herself holding the bouquet and being faced down by twelve unhappy young women.

"You got the bouquet!" Alysa shouted happily. "That means you're going to get married!"

"What?" She looked at the little girl in confusion. "What does catching flowers have to do with my getting married?"

Ino laughed. "I guess they don't have this tradition in Lightning country. Here we believe that whoever catches the bouquet is the next one to get married." Though Ino couldn't see it Chouji let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh," Yugito looked down at the flowers she was holding. "I see."

"So who's the lucky guy?" Ino teased.

Yugito insisted there was no one she would even think of marrying, but held the flowers tightly to make sure she didn't lose them.

---

Having said their goodbyes Shikamaru and Temari climbed into a closed carriage and headed out of the village. They would spend a week in a little seaside villa for their honeymoon. Normally Temari would never travel in a carriage; she preferred traveling under her own power. But it was tradition that the couple leave for their honeymoon in a carriage. They would go to an Inn not far from Konoha and stay there for the night. Afterwards they would continue on their own.

The carriage was wide and had cushioned seats. Shikamaru happily stretched out and let out a relieved sigh. "Well I'm glad that's over with, now we can just relax."

Temari carefully pulled the curtains down on the two door windows. As soon as that was done she began pulling off her wedding kimono. "Who the hell said anything about rest you lazy ninja?" There was a smile on her face and an evil gleam in her eye. "I'm still not pregnant and you have work to do."

Shikamaru sat up and looked at her in horror. "Here?!"

---

As the wedding carriage rolled along people wondered why it seemed to be rocking so much.

---

Four weeks later.

"As we agreed." The blue haired ninja placed a massive briefcase on his desk. "One hundred million ryu in cash. As well as this," she placed a sealed document upon his desk. "A non aggression pact between our respective forces and a guarantee not to operate in or accept missions from Lightning country."

The Raikage's greedy eyes settled on the briefcase. "Excellent."

Konan frowned at the man's weakness. To think such a greedy fool had risen all the way to Kage. "The Amekage expects you to keep your end of the bargain as well."

The Raikage nodded. "Of course, I am happy to hand Yugito over to you. She has served me well, but she has always been a danger."

Konan nodded. "You have done very well for yourself and your village. Not only will you remove the danger but you've made a great profit." Behind her smile Konan hoped that this was the first ninja village Pein destroyed. "The Amekage will be pleased to know that everything is going according to plan."

## An old tradition

November was when fall began turning into winter. All the harvests were in and the fields were left bare. The trees had shed their leaves and the roses had withered away and would not be seen again until the following spring. There would be the first real cold days and the winds would pick up. Often the first snow flurries would come in November, leaving it all to clear that winter was on the way.

It was a time to ready yourself for the bitter storms to come.

---

Since becoming Hokage Naruto had been learning that very few of his decisions were truly significant. That is to say that in the time he'd been Hokage perhaps six or seven of his decisions were vital to the survival and well being of his village and his people. Most of his decisions were important only to the people who were directly involved. Naruto was often forced to deal with issues that pitted one group from the village against another.

He really hated those situations because there was usually no clear cut, 'bad guy.' Both parties were loyal and law abiding. But they would want different things and he was expected to settle their dispute. Usually with the result that one side ended up very unhappy with him. He tried to be as even handed as he could, but there were just times when his actions had to favor one side or the other. As he and his little group headed toward the Hyuga mansion he recalled a conversation he'd had with Tsunade shortly after being made her successor. He'd had his mother and his niisan drill honor and codes of conduct into him from birth. Jiraiya had tried to give him a pragmatic point of view. Tsunade had tried to combine the two, idealism with a good bit of practicality.

---

Eight months ago.



The two of them were leaving the Tower. Tsunade smiled at him.  
"How did you like your first day as acting Hokage?"

"Please tell me there usually isn't that much paper work." He grumbled.

She laughed. "I hate to break this to you Naruto, but not every day will involve life or death decisions. But in a lot of ways the smaller decisions you'll have will be harder than the big ones."

"What do you mean?"

Tsunade grinned. "Well, when Orochimaru is attacking the village it's pretty easy to know what needs to be done. But when two groups come up to you both claiming to have been cheated and ask you to decide who is in the wrong it can be hard to sort out."

"I don't see why, I'll just punish the one who is wrong." Naruto replied.

"Oh really?" Tsunade said. "A man owns a one of a kind sword which he believes to be defective. The sword was especially made by his clan and he has spent many years hoping to unleash its power. Finally convinced it will never be the mighty weapon it should be he decides to simply give it away. A member of a different clan took the unwanted sword and was able to finally unleash its full potential. Seeing the weapon really was as powerful as he had hoped he demanded it be returned to him as it had originally been his and he had only given it away because he thought the sword useless. The second clan refused to give up ownership claiming the first had given up all rights to it. They both come to you demanding that the sword is theirs. How do you rule?"

Naruto gave the situation some thought. In his mind he compared the one of a kind sword to one of his father's unique jutsu scroll. He imagined his mother somehow mistaking it for a common library scroll and simply giving it away without realizing what it really was.

"I would have it returned to the original clan." Naruto stated and explained his reasoning.

Tsunade nodded. "So according to you I should have removed Gabrella from your mother's squad and placed her in another one of Riyuki's choosing."

He stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

"The example I just gave you was about Gabrella, she was the unique weapon. Her father spent many hours and much effort trying to help her develop the sharingan. When he gave up hope that she would ever succeed he declared that he and the Uchiha clan were disinterested in her. At which point I placed her under Kushina. Well of course Gabrella finally achieved sharingan, at which point her father demanded she be reassigned to a new squad." Tsunade nodded to herself. "I refused."

"Arrogant jerk, I'd have refused to." Naruto declared.

"Oh?" She came to an abrupt halt. "Why the sudden change of heart?"

Naruto frowned. "Well because Riyuki is arrogant and..."

"So you're going to base your decisions on personal preference?" Tsunade frowned. "That's not justice Naruto that's playing favorites. Suppose Gabrella were a member of the Nara clan who had failed to use shadow jutsus. Say she was placed under a sensei who was an Uchiha and that somehow he was able to help her activate her kekkei genkai. If Shikamaru or Yoshino came to you wanting her placed on a new squad after telling you they'd had no interest in her what would you do then? Would you reverse yourself again just because it was the Nara's? Even if you don't like a particular person or group Naruto as Hokage you are honor bound to treat them with the same respect and concern you show for everyone else."

He listened to her and he slowly nodded. "I guess you're right." He let out a depressed sigh. "It sounds like being Hokage is going to be even harder than I thought."

"Oh it will be trust me. You're going to have situations where different rights come into conflict. Kami help you the first time one of the merchant guilds has an argument with one of the clans." She shut her eyes in remembered pain. "You get one side screaming about contracts and agreements and the other shouting about clan rights and they both have some points. It can be a real headache sometimes."

"So what do you do?" He asked genuinely curious.

She started walking again. "You do the best that you can, and if at all possible you try to find some sort of compromise where both sides can at least get something."

Naruto thought that very good advice and made sure to remember it.

---

As the four of them entered the Hyuga estates his wife suddenly leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"Thank you for doing this Naruto-kun. I know this is putting you in a difficult position."

He looked over to her and gave her a little smile. "It's all right Hinata-chan, I'd do anything for you and I know just how much this means to you. Besides," he looked over at their two companions. "I happen to think this is the right thing to do, even if it is going to be hard."

---

After all his stays at the Hyuga mansion Naruto didn't need the guards to show him the way to Hiashi's study. He could have led them. In short order he and the others were allowed in. Hiashi and the other clan members who were waiting bowed to him.

"You honor us with this visit Hokage-sama." Hiashi said in his usual formal voice. If he was curious he hid it well. He nodded to the others present. "As you requested the elders and four cadet branch members are also here."

"Thank you for honoring my request Hiashi-san." Naruto, Hinata, Neji, and Tenten bowed to him. "I know it was short notice and I appreciate it."

"I am at your service Hokage-sama. Now that we are all here can you tell me the cause for this meeting?" He glanced at Neji and Tenten. Neji looked completely at ease whereas Tenten was clearly fidgeting. "I presume it has something to do with my nephew and his girlfriend."

"It is." Naruto answered. He looked at Hiashi and the elders warily. They were good people, and he was personally in their debt. And if they were too formal and too committed to rigid and harsh traditions that by itself did not make them bad men.

Of course Naruto had never had the caged bird seal placed on him or lived with the fact that his children would have it placed on them. (The Hyuga wouldn't have dared to make that a condition for Hinata's marrying the Namikaze clan heir. Kushina had told Hiashi many years before that as much as she adored Hinata she would never permit her grandchildren to bear the seal.)

Neji calmly reached out and took Tenten's hand into his. "Hiashi-sama, I wish to marry Tenten and make her my wife."

The news was hardly shocking to anyone who had seen the two of them together. Hiashi nodded and even produced a small smile. "I am pleased to hear that. I heartily approve and will welcome her into the clan. But why did you feel the need to have the Hokage and Hinata present? You could have simply told me in private."

Neji looked at his uncle calmly. "I do not want the caged bird seal placed on my children. I have come here with the Hokage and with

Hinata-san in the hopes of convincing the clan to end the practice."

To Hiashi's right were the four elders of the Hyuga clan, all of them main branch members. To Hiashi's left were four members of the cadet branch. Neji's simple statement produced immediate reactions from both groups.

The elders looked as if they were having strokes and immediately began to shouting at Neji about clan traditions and clan loyalties and clan business. The cadet members said nothing at all, it was not their place to speak unless spoken to, but each one could not keep a hopeful look from crossing their faces.

It took Hiashi a moment to calm down the elders. He faced Naruto with a frown and a very displeased look. "Is that the reason you have come here Hokage-sama? To try and *force* us to end the practice?"

"The seal is one of our most honored clan traditions." One of the elders snapped.

Neji looked at him and quirked an eyebrow. "Have you ever asked someone who actually wears it whether or not they want the honor?"

"It's cruel and barbaric!" Tenten shouted. "I wouldn't use it on an enemy never mind on children."

Naruto and Hiashi both motioned for silence.

"Everyone please calm down." Naruto focused on Hiashi. "I give you my solemn word that I have not come here to try and force the Hyuga clan to do anything it does not want to."

Hiashi nodded warily. "I am happy to hear that Hokage-sama. After all, the Hyuga clan has been loyal to this village since its founding. In return for this loyalty we naturally expect to have the rights promised to us by the Shodai honored."

Naruto held up his hands. "Believe me Hiashi-san I know about the special rights of clans and I am not about to interfere with that." If he did. If he was seen interfering with a clan's rights, even over something as distasteful as the bird seal the other clans would be up in arms and screaming he had over stepped his bounds as Hokage. Given the... precarious situation he was in with Akatsuki, Uchiha, and Danzo he needed the clans to keep supporting him.

"I am pleased to hear this given the fact that your own clan took full advantage of those rights." Hiashi pointed out.

The elder who had spoken before decided to make the point unmistakably clear. "Your mother killed dozens of men in cold blood to protect you and she was never so much as rebuked for it. If it were not for clan rights you never would have made it to your first birthday."

Hiashi sent the man a look that silenced him. The last thing he wanted was to antagonize the Hokage and damage the close ties that the two clans shared. Especially since Naruto was not shouting or threatening.

"Please forgive that outburst Hokage-sama. I know you are aware of the value of the special status that clans enjoy. As I also know you are aware of how much my clan and I personally have done on your behalf."

Naruto could only nod at that. "Hiashi-san, I readily admit that my mother used the clan rights to protect me. I am also more than ready to acknowledge the huge debt I owe to you and your clan. Not only for your protection, but for allowing me to marry my beloved Hinata-chan." He took a deep breath. "As I have already stated I will not try to force the Hyuga clan to do anything against its will. I am here to try and convince you that it is in the clan's own interests to end the practice."

His very beautiful and very pregnant wife stepped forward. "Father you know how much pain and suffering the seal has caused. It has

torn our family in two and reduced most of our clan to hopeless servitude." She looked pleadingly from her father to the elders. "This is not how a family should be."

"My daughter," Hiashi spoke firmly. "The seal is necessary, for the good of the clan as well as the village. It is needed to protect the secrets of the byakugan."

"That is a lie." Neji stated flatly. "If that were true then *every* member of the clan would wear the seal."

"How dare you call the leader of your clan a liar?" The same elder said angrily. "Show him the proper respect or..." One word too late he snapped his mouth shut.

Neji grinned, he knew what the man had been about to say. "Or he will punish me by activating my seal. *That* is the only real purpose to the seal, to force obedience through threat."

"No Neji," Hiashi spoke up and covered up any embarrassment he might have felt. "Its purpose is to protect the byakugan. That has always been the main reason for the seal."

"In that case Hiashi-san," Naruto spoke. "I respectfully submit to you that the seal is not worth the trouble it causes. The fact of the matter is that while information can be gained from corpses it is virtually impossible to artificially create a kekkei genkai. Over the past decades how many bodies of Uchiha, Nara, main branch Hyuga, have enemies recovered? Yet in all that time no one has ever found a way to artificially create a kekkei genkai. In fact, pretty much everyone agrees that the only way to acquire one is to get a living person and then breed. That being the case what real value does the seal hold?"

Hiashi frowned. "Hokage-sama it is an unfortunate reality that in this world some must lead and some must follow. Success in battle as well in life is only possible when there is absolute discipline. Each

member must play his or her part in order for the whole group to succeed."

"I agree that discipline is vital to success." Naruto frowned. "But every other clan manages without having to resort to corporal punishment. They instead rely on simple family loyalty and love."

Hiashi looked at him in genuine surprise and slowly shook his head. "I am sorry, but as a simple practical matter I would prefer to rely on the seal. I understand that many see it as a negative or even as distasteful. Nevertheless the absolute security it provides has long been a strength. One we do not choose to give up."

Naruto was very unhappy at what he would have to now do. He had honestly hoped that Hiashi might see simple reason. Hiashi was a good man and though formal and reserved Naruto knew he was fair. But on certain subjects his mind was made up and he was not open to change.

At least not until the need for change was rubbed into his face.

"What would you say if the seal was no longer a strength but a terrible weakness?" Naruto said quietly.

"How so?" Hiashi asked.

Naruto looked over to Neji who barely nodded. "May I have your permission to perform a jutsu?"

Hiashi again looked surprised. "I presume it is not dangerous?"

"Not to you." Naruto assured.

"Very well." Hiashi said.

Naruto looked at the four cadet branch members. "I am sorry." He performed seven seals. " **Pain.** "



The caged bird seals all began to glow. Immediately Neji and the other four screamed and dropped to the floor clutching at their heads. Naruto released the jutsu after just a handful of seconds. It sickened him to have to hurt innocent people, but he hoped they would forgive him.

Tenten and Hinata were kneeling over Neji as he and the others were still lying on the floor. The elders and Hiashi meanwhile were standing there dumbfounded.

"How did you do that?!" The elder shrieked. "Only Hyuga members have the ability to activate the caged bird seal!"

Naruto sent him a nasty little smile. "You don't really know much about seals do you?" He decided to give Hiashi and the rest a quick lesson on the basics of Fuinjutsu. He spoke almost the exact same words Jiraiya had while teaching him. "Every seal is both a strength and a weakness because essentially every seal is a lock of one sort or another. The strength comes from the fact that a lock will protect and secure. The weakness comes from the fact that **any** lock can be opened so long as you have the proper key."

"This was some sort of trick." The elder insisted. "I refuse to believe that anyone outside the clan could activate the seal."

Naruto sighed. "Why? Because a Hyuga originally invented it so only a Hyuga could possibly figure out how it works?" This was the sort of arrogance that was poisoning the Uchiha clan. The automatic assumption of superiority based not on ability but on simple birth. In the ninja world it was usually fatal to assume others could not do the same things you could.

"Ukal," Hiashi spoke calmly. "The Hokage is recognized as a seal master and was trained by Jiraiya himself. We must acknowledge his expertise in this field."

"But it is impossible." Ukal turned and, did not quite, glare at the Hokage. "It must have been some sort of trick."

"I thought you would believe that. Which is the reason I asked Hiashi-san to choose four adult cadet branch members and have them present. If you require more proof go pick out any other members with the seal. I guarantee you this is no trick." None of them seemed eager to take him up on the offer. A fact for which Naruto was relieved.

"I acknowledge that you were able to activate the seals." Hiashi stated. This time no one objected.

"You should be aware that I could kill just easily as I inflicted pain. I trust you can all appreciate the fact that should this jutsu become known to our enemies three quarters of the Hyuga clan would immediately be rendered useless for missions or battles. Rather than being a strength they would become a liability."

Hiashi and the elders all looked at one another nervously. The harsh truth was that if their enemies could kill them with a single jutsu then every cadet branch member really would have to be restricted to the village. Three quarters of their number would be made ineffective overnight. "I trust that as Hokage you would not allow this information to be released." Hiashi said.

"Of course not, I would never do anything that would put my own people at risk. But the point is it **can** be done." Naruto looked at them seriously. "Sooner or later someone from another village will figure this out just as I have. Especially when they learn it's possible."

"As Hokage you cannot make this public knowledge." Hiashi stated. "That too would endanger the village."

"Oh I won't say a word." Naruto said.

"But I will." Hinata said firmly.

"So will I." Tenten said as she helped Neji back to his feet.

"As will I." Neji said as he leaned more heavily than usual on his cane.

"I will." One of the cadet members spoke.

"And so will I." Another stated. All four of the witnesses stated they would tell people about what had happened.

Hiashi looked at them as though they were all mad. "Do you understand that by letting this information get out you will be putting the lives of every cadet member in serious danger?"

"If it means that my children will never bear this seal then I am willing to take that risk." Neji said. To Hiashi's surprise the others all nodded.

Hiashi looked back at Naruto. "Hokage-sama you are destroying my clan's most important tradition."

"Which only proves that some traditions really need to be destroyed." Naruto said with the slightest bit of sympathy. "Traditions are man made Hiashi-san, they are not given to us by holy writ. Now it just so happens that along with developing a way to activate the seals I have also come up with a way to permanently deactivate them." This new revelation brought more excitement from every clan member in the room both cadet and main branch.

Hinata had always been upset about how the cadet branch was treated. But when Neji had come to her to confess that he wanted to marry Tenten, but did not want his children to have the seal, it had set a new fire under her. The fact Alysia's new best friend was also a Hyuga branch member was one more reason. Naruto had worked hard on creating two more new jutsus. One that would activate the curse seal and one that render it inert. Then he'd had to come up with a way to convince the Hyuga clan without causing them to hate him.

"I realize that this may be a very difficult transition." Naruto spoke up. "Therefore if the Hyuga clan would agree to abolish the caged bird seal and allow me to deactivate all the current ones I would be willing to offer up some compensation."

"What sort of compensation?" Hiashi asked suspiciously.

Naruto smiled. "I will allow the Hyuga clan to establish a new security force within the village and I will recognize you as its head."

There was silence at the surprising offer. "My clan has long sought to form a rival force to match the military police that the Uchiha dominate. Are you saying that if I agree to your terms you will authorize a second military police force?"

Naruto nodded. "That's right. Currently the ANBU and the military police share responsibility for maintaining the internal security of the village. I propose that you found a new security force with the Hyuga serving as its core. We can call it the internal security force, or the ISF. You will receive the exact same funding and have the exact same authority within the village as the military police. The ANBU will remain the only organization dealing with both internal and external threats."

Hiashi considered the offer. "This is something I have wanted since your father was still Hokage. It will greatly increase the standing and power of my clan." He looked at Naruto shrewdly. "Why do you offer it to me now?"

"As I said it is compensation." Naruto replied simply.

Hiashi grinned knowingly. "You do not trust the Uchiha."

"I never said that."

"But you do not deny it."

Naruto smiled carefully. "What if I just say that having known the Hyuga clan my entire life I have faith in the honor and loyalty in *this* clan?" Naruto extended his hand. "Will you accept my offer Hiashi-san?"

Hiashi hesitated a moment. Getting rid of the caged bird seal was a radical step, and one he was not eager to take. But the fact was that if the seal could be activated by others it was worthless. Worse than worthless it was an exposed weakness. Whether he liked it or not the seal would have to be gotten rid of, and the chance to completely outshine the Uchiha was just too good to pass up.

He reached out and firmly shook hands with the Hokage. "Hokage-sama, we have an agreement."

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And so in one step Naruto destroyed a tradition that he and most others found despicable while establishing a new department that would rival the military police. And doing so while keeping the Hyuga clan firmly on his side.

Tsunade would have been proud.

**SPOILER!!**

**SPOILER!!**

**SPOILER!!**

**Author's Note:** This is a rant that has to do with the most recent manga. If you do not want to know what is happening there please read no further.

In my stories I have...

Killed Naruto (multiple times)

Killed Sasuke (multiple)

Killed Sakura (multiple)

Killed Hinata

Killed Tsunade

Killed Orochimaru

Killed Kabuto

Killed Sarutobi

Killed Shikaku

Killed Inoichi

Killed Choza

Killed Chouji

Killed Gaara

Killed Kankuro

Killed Temari

Killed Zabuza

Killed Kisame (multiple)

Killed Itachi (multiple)

Made Hinata a cold hearted avenger

Made Hinata Ino's rival

Made Hinata give Naruto her first kiss publicly at a party

Made Hinata cut Ino's ponytail off

Made Hinata a pregnant wife

Made Hinata a scarred ANBU black ops captain

Made Sasuke Naruto's best friend

Made Sasuke Naruto's killer

Made Sasuke lose the sharingan

Made Sasuke gain the mangekyo sharingan

Made Sasuke learn the inner gates

Made Sasuke kiss Sakura and later tell her it meant nothing

Made Sakura an avenger

Made Sakura date Lee

Made Kakashi retrieve Sasuke

Made Kakashi Naruto's niisan

Made Kakashi perform a mission hanged as a woman

Made Kakashi a willing servant of Orochimaru

Made Tsunade lose a game of cards to a nine year old who had never played before

Made Tsunade sacrifice herself to save Naruto

Made Tsunade baby-sit

Made Tsunade try to teach medical jutsus to Naruto

Made Tsunade date Jiraiya

Made Tsunade torture Jiraiya with a five pound bag of salt

Made Jiraiya offer to give up peeping at women while training Naruto

Made Jiraiya take Naruto with him to Iwa

Made Jiraiya question his sanity because he was in love with Tsunade

Made Minato a traitor

Made Orochimaru the Yondaime Hokage

Made Naruto Kage of a village other than Konoha

Allowed the Kyuubi to destroy Konoha

Allowed the Kyuubi to be extracted

Made Anko Orochimaru's lover and right hand

Made Anko an avenger

Made Anko a stripper at a bachelor party

Made Anko a pregnant wife

Made Anko Naruto's aunt

Now I am fine with all of the above and a whole lot more. But Itachi massacring his entire clan and still somehow being one of the good guys?

Sorry, that is just too much for me to imagine! Here is my problem. If Itachi had killed all the Uchiha NINJA I could understand that, especially if they were plotting a coup. He killed the ENTIRE clan which would have included a good number of helpless civilians as well as BABIES AND CHILDREN. Any action that includes the mass slaughter of innocents cannot be considered lawful or justified under ANY circumstances. And if he was acting under Sarutobi's orders (which I do not believe) I would lose respect for Sarutobi as well.



## Two promises

Red flames within a golden circle inside a black square. That was the symbol of the new ISF.

Riyuki hated it.

No, he didn't simply hate it; he despised it with every fiber of his being. The ISF had been granted life thanks to an executive order of the Hokage's. And the Hyuga clan had built it up with an indecent haste. Soon there would be ninja running about the village with their badges claiming to have the same authority and expertise and the Military Police. So far as Riyuki was concerned the very existence of the ISF was nothing less than an insult to the entire Uchiha clan.

And he had made damn sure the Hokage knew it.

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"This is an outrage!!" Riyuki shouted.

Naruto was sitting behind his desk in his pristine Hokage robes utterly calm. "What is?" He said with a straight face.

"Don't play dumb! You damn well know I am talking about this fraud police force you've invented!"

"The ISF is very real I assure you. Hiashi promises me it will be fully functional within two weeks and I believe him." Naruto remained completely serene.

"I demand that you rescind your executive order and not allow this abomination to take place."

"No."

Since becoming the clan head of the Uchiha, Riyuki had not heard that word very often. And he was damned if he would allow even the

Hokage to deny him.

"The very existence of this so called police force of yours is a direct and unforgivable insult to my clan."

"How have I insulted your clan by taking steps to better protect this village?" Naruto asked reasonably.

"We were given the right to establish the military police by the Shodai Hokage himself! We consider that to be a central part of our clan rights."

To Riyuki's surprise Naruto not only remained calm but actually nodded his agreement. "I recognize that fact and would not do anything to deny you or your clan what was given to you by the Shodai. And I haven't."

"What do you mean? This invention of yours is a direct threat to my clan's rights."

"It is no such thing; it in no way threatens the existence of the military police. I have in fact done nothing at all to the funding or inner workings of the organization. I have left the military police completely untouched."

"You have violated our traditional right to enforce the laws of this village!"

"No, I haven't. You are still free to enforce the laws of this village. You will simply have additional help."

"We have always acted alone and I demand that you leave us our time-honored duty."

"I hate to correct you Riyuki but that is just not so. The military police have *never* been the sole authority within this village. They have always shared that responsibility with the ANBU. The Shodai never granted you the exclusive right to enforce the laws of this village, not

even in his own lifetime. You cannot demand I respect a right that was never yours to begin with."

Riyuki stared at the Hokage with impotent fury. "This is an insult and I promise you that my clan will not stand for it."

"You are free to bring the matter up with the council."

"What good would that do?" Riyuki said bitterly. "Of the sixteen members three of them are related to you by blood or marriage. While your most recent addition is your own personal servant."

That taunt brought out the first sign of emotion as Naruto frowned. "Haku is not my servant, he is a good friend of mine, and he is about to become your son in law."

"Which does me no good at all since he will never go against your wishes. Most of the rest of the council seems to be made up of personal friends of yours."

"I've known most of them since I was an academy student and being friends had nothing to do with politics." Naruto fondly recalled birthday parties and afternoons chasing Gamikichi around. "Anyway, isn't that what a Hokage is supposed to do? Build up his support on the council?"

"The point is the council is nothing more than a rubber stamp. You will always find a majority on it to support whatever you do."

"Have you ever stopped to think that maybe the reason they support me is because they think I am doing a good job and believe in me?" Naruto asked quietly.

Riyuki shook his head. The council had nothing to do with any of that, it was all about politics and getting what you wanted through promises or intimidation. "I will admit this much; you are a far more effective Hokage than I ever expected a fifteen year old to be."

"I'm sixteen now." Naruto answered. "And I've had some damn good teachers."

"Be that as it may Hokage-sama, this creation of yours is a direct challenge to the supremacy of the Uchiha clan, and we will not tolerate it." Riyuki warned.

Naruto narrowed his eyes. "You know Riyuki, that sounds an awful lot like a threat."

"You are free to take it however you wish Hokage-sama, but know that my clan will not tolerate the Hyuga acting as policemen." He had said what he had come to say. He gave the Hokage a slight bow and turned to go.

"Riyuki," Naruto spoke and he halted his exit. "My nindo is to never go back on my word, and I never have. I have never broken a promise. I am going to make you two promises right here and now. First, I give you my word that so long as the Uchiha clan is loyal to this village and to me I will *never* interfere with your clan rights. I will treat the Uchiha clan with the exact same amount of respect that I show every other clan of this village."

Riyuki nodded, that was only proper but he was glad to hear it. Even though in his opinion Naruto was doing exactly that by creating a rival police force. "And your second promise?"

And as Riyuki watched Naruto's face darkened. "If the Uchiha clan ever betrays this village, I'll destroy them."

"What?!"

Naruto repeated himself. "If the Uchiha clan betrays the village I will annihilate them."

"You would dare make such a threat openly?"

"It is not a threat, it is a promise, and you can be sure that *anyone* who betrays this village will meet the same end."

Riyuki offered up a false smile. "The Uchiha clan would never betray the village or it's Hokage."

Naruto's smile was just as fake. "Of course not, I never for a second thought that."

Riyuki gave a second more respectful bow and left the office.

---

That night he had asked his daughter to return home so he could speak with her. Gabrella had been happy to do so in the hopes that the clan had finally accepted the fact she was helping Haku found Momochi. She was wrong.

"I want you to end your engagement to Haku." Riyuki told her flatly.

Gabrella stared at her father. She had been in love with him for over three years now. He was the only one she wanted to be with. "Father how can you even ask that? I had a very hard time making my choice but I made it. How can you expect me to go back on it now?"

Riyuki frowned at his only child. "Things are changing Gabrella. Since the sixth came into power things have become far worse, both within and without the village. Haku is no more than a puppet of the Hokage's, even if he does have a powerful bloodline. The elders and I agree that you should not marry him."

"I don't believe this. Father there is no way I would ever break up with Haku."

Her father looked at her sadly. "In that case, I will have no choice but to disown you daughter. You will no longer be seen as an Uchiha and you will not be welcomed in this house or in the Uchiha compound."

She gasped; she had never once imagined that he could be this cruel. "You'd disown me for marrying into another clan? That happens every damn year! Hitomi married into the Nara clan just a couple months ago. Have you disowned her too?"

"Hitomi did not marry a clan head who is tied completely to the Hokage. Things are changing Gabrella. The day is coming when you will have to choose sides."

She did not like the sound of that one bit. "I don't need to choose sides, father." She took a hold of the hitai-ite that was around her neck. "This is my side. And in case you've forgotten you wear one just like it."

"So you would put your loyalty to the village above that to the clan?"

She shook her head. "They aren't mutually exclusive father. I can be loyal to both. The Uchiha clan is a part of the village, we serve the village not simply ourselves."

Riyuki nodded as though agreeing. "Of course we do, and that would never change. But a storm is coming Gabrella, and no one can know just what the future holds. You are determined to marry Haku regardless of my wishes or the wishes of the elders?"

She stiffened her back. "That's right father. I love him and I am marrying him."

He looked at her with real sadness. Even if he didn't always show it he *did* love her. But the clan came first, even before immediate family. "In that case I ask you to no longer consider yourself to be an Uchiha or my daughter."

She stared at him a moment, not believing he could do something so callous so easily.

Finally she took a step back and gave him a deep bow. "Who am I to argue with the mighty Uchiha clan?" She turned her back to him.

"Goodbye Uchiha Riyuki." She marched out of the house she had grown up in and out of the Uchiha compound. She promised herself she would never step foot into either one again.

---

"Hokage-sama, would you please marry us?"

Naruto looked up from the dinner table where he and all the other residents of the mansion were eating. Gabrella had stormed in and dragged Haku out of his seat to talk to him. After a few minutes they had come back into the dining room.

Naruto didn't understand the need for the question. "I've already agreed to Gabrella. I'm very happy to perform the ceremony."

"I mean would you marry us right now?" Gabrella clarified.

"Now?" Naruto asked. Gabrella and Haku both shook their heads.

"But Gabrella," Kushina spoke up. "I thought you wanted to have a big wedding next spring? What about all the plans? Your wedding kimono isn't even ready yet."

She bowed low to her sensei. "I am very sorry for ruining all the plans we made together Kushina-sensei. I really did want to have a big fancy wedding with lots of guests. But I've decided that what I really want is to be Momochi Gabrella and I want it tonight. I don't want to wait."

Kushina frowned. "What happened with your father?" Gabrella had told her about the meeting and her hopes of fixing the differences between them.

"He asked me to break my engagement. When I refused he disowned me."

"He did what?!" Kushina was on her feet furious. "How dare he! The only reason to disown someone is if they have committed some

unforgivable crime like murder or treason. I can't believe he would do this simply because you are marrying someone he doesn't approve of!"

Gabrella shook her head. "It doesn't matter why he's doing it. The fact is I am no longer an Uchiha, so I figure I may as well get a head start on being a Momochi."

Naruto stood up from the dinner table. "I'd be happy to marry you two tonight, but are you sure you don't want to wait even a few days? I'm sure my mom could set up something and you could invite guests."

Gabrella shook her head adamantly. "I want this done tonight." She paused in thought. "But there is someone I'd like to invite."

---

"So the two of you are tying the fucking knot huh?" Tayuya said.

Kushina immediately looked in her direction. "Tayuya, you do know I have plenty of soap in this house don't you?"

Tayuya shivered at her memories and nodded.

Gabrella smiled. "Better be careful with your language or you know what will happen."

"Yeah I fu... I know." Tayuya let out a sigh of frustration that was only partly due to having to censor herself. "Well congratulations, I know you'll be happy."

Gabrella nodded. "Thank you, and even though I hadn't gotten around to asking, would you be my maid of honor?"

Tayuya blinked. "Me? I sort of expected you would ask Hinata. I mean we haven't exactly gotten along real well."



"I know, but you saved me and Haku more than once. And I'm sort of hoping maybe we can finally stop fighting over him and be good friends."

A bit surprised at the offer Tayuya nodded. "I'd like that." She actually meant it. They had been teammates for awhile now, and though there were jealousies and fights between them, there was also a powerful respect and occasional liking. (Especially when Haku was somewhere else.)

---

It was a very different sort of wedding. There was no planning, no formal dress, no music, no walk down the aisle, and except for Tayuya the only people attending were the people who lived at the mansion. There was also a certain amount of irony given the fact that a girl who had spent her whole life dreaming of a big formal wedding had wound up insisting on what really amounted to an elopement.

There was also a bit of irony in the fact that Anko wound up attending a wedding at the Namikaze mansion, with Kushina present, dressed in a trench coat, mini skirt, and fishnet.

The ceremony was small and completely informal, but by the way the couple kissed it seemed clear they were both happy with it.

---

There was a loud and insistent knocking on Kiba's apartment door.

"I'm coming already!" He shouted as he opened the door. There was Tayuya standing in her usual ninja clothing, looking at him as though she was thinking about kicking him. "Tayuya, what are you doing here?"

"Right now I'm standing in the fucking hallway. Are you going to invite me in or what?"

"Uh, sure," he stepped aside. "Come on in." After she'd stepped inside he closed the door. He was looking at her a little nervously. "What can I do for you?"

She looked at him suspiciously. "Why have you been sending me flowers and candy since we had sex?"

Feeling like he was on trial he nervously scratched his neck. "Well I guess I thought you might like them."

She shook her head. "I know that. What I mean is *why* do you send them?"

He looked at her and knew that if he lied she would know it. He stared at the floor and mumbled something.

"What was that?" Tayuya questioned.

"I said I like you." Kiba repeated just a little louder.

She snorted. "Which means you're hoping to fuck me again."

"No!" he snapped his eyes back up to meet hers. "I don't just want to have sex, I really like you and I want you to be my girlfriend."

"Bullshit!" she shouted at him. "I'm not the kind of girl that guys want to be with." Images of Gabrella and Hinata flashed through her mind. "I'm the one guys just want to fuck and forget."

"I don't! I really like you and I really want to be with you!"

"Oh yeah? Why? Why would you want to be with someone like me?"

"Look, I won't pretend I don't want to have sex with you. You're beautiful, you have a killer body, and you are just an animal in bed." Despite her own blunt nature she actually blushed at that. "But that's not it. You're honest and straightforward and you never play the stupid games other girls do. You're fun to be with and when you're around things are always interesting." He looked away again. "Look I

know that I'm not Haku. I'm really not the sensitive type, but I'm a good guy and I would treat you good. I just plain like you." He let out a depressed sigh. He was sure Haku could have said that much more smoothly, but sharing feeling was not his thing.

Tayuya stared at him in surprise. She wasn't sure what she'd been expecting when she'd decided to come here. Part of her had wanted to just finally confront Kiba on why he kept sending her stuff. Another part of her was feeling lonely and had been sort of hoping for another one nighter. No part of her had expected him to come right out and say he genuinely liked her.

"So you really want to date me?"

"Yeah," he nodded.

She shrugged. "Ok then."

He looked at her in surprise and in sudden hope. "Ok?" His heart began pounding in his chest.

She nodded. "If you're serious we can give it a shot. But," she stuck a finger in his face. "There are two things you better understand right up front. I've been played and I won't ever let that happen again. So one, don't ever lie to me. If you ever lie to me it's over. And two, if I ever catch you cheating on me I'll cut your fucking balls off. Got me?"

He nodded. "I understand, I promise I won't ever lie or cheat." *Man she's scary, but so hot!*

"Good," she grabbed him and brought his mouth down to hers. She eagerly sent her tongue into his mouth and began pulling off his jacket. "Now take me to bed and I'll show you what kind of an animal I am!"

That was all the invitation he needed as he scooped her up and headed towards the bedroom.

---

Two weeks had passed and the ISF had finally begun operation. There had been no further complaints from the Uchiha clan. Naruto wasn't sure whether to be relieved by their silence, or to be worried about it. He tended to go with the latter.

There was a knock on his office door and Shizune poked her head in. "Pardon me Hokage-sama but Jiraiya is here and he insists on talking to you immediately."

Naruto calmly nodded even as his stomach turned to ice. Jiraiya hadn't planned on returning to the village so soon. If he was here demanding to talk it couldn't possibly be good news.

Jiraiya came in and carefully shut the door. One look at his face confirmed Naruto's fears. As was his habit, Jiraiya did not bother wasting any time. He pulled out a scroll and handed it over. "Kid we have got a serious problem. This is a copy, don't ask me how I got it but I guarantee you it's one hundred percent authentic."

Naruto quickly opened up the scroll and began reading it. His eyebrows jumped at what was there. "A non aggression pact between Akatsuki and Lightning?" he couldn't believe that any kage could be so blind as to actually trust Akatsuki. Or so stupid as to hand over a loyal ninja to them, never mind a jinchuuriki. "Jiraiya are you absolutely sure this is real?"

"Kid if I had any doubts I wouldn't be here in person. There's no doubt about it. Yugito is about to be betrayed."

# Will you

**Author's Notes:** The short poem Naruto speaks was actually read out by the emperor Hirohito to his advisors shortly before the attack on Pearl Harbor.

---

## Short Story

Hinata, Gabrella, and Temari were sitting down at a restaurant for lunch one day. The fourth member of their group was running a bit late. The three married women all began to make small talk and not surprisingly the conversation turned to the subject of their husbands. Each of them naturally thought that they had the best husband and began arguing back and forth to no avail. Seeing their arguing was getting them nowhere Temari had an idea.

"Hey, instead of arguing about whose husband is the best why don't we compare the feature about our husbands we like best?" Temari said.

"Well that sounds interesting." Gabrella said. "I'm in."

Hinata nodded. "Oh, me too."

"All right then, why don't you start us off Hinata?" Temari stated.

"Well, Naruto's best feature is definitely his eyes." She let out a girlish sigh that hinted at long hours spent thinking about those eyes. "They are the most amazing shade of blue and when he looks at me in a certain way I..." she began to blush just at the thought. "I just know that he loves me and always will."

"Awww," Gabrella smiled.

"That is sweet." Temari nodded and turned to her right. "Why don't you go next Gabrella?"

"Sure, with Haku his best feature is without a doubt his lips." Gabrella smiled dreamily. "They are unbelievably soft and when he kisses me he makes my knees weak."

Hinata put a hand over her mouth and giggled. Temari grinned approvingly.

"So how about you Temari?" Gabrella asked.

"Well believe it or not Shikamaru's best feature is his hands. They're strong but also very gentle. When he holds me I know he will never let me go, and I know he will also be gentle with me."

Both the other girls agreed that was a great trait for a husband to have.

"Well, this still doesn't help us pick a winner." Temari complained.

"Winner for what?" The fourth member of their group arrived and pulled up a seat.

"Oh Anko," Hinata greeted her. "We were trying to decide which of us has the best husband and so we were comparing the best feature of each."

Temari nodded. "That's right, for Naruto it's his eyes, for Haku it's his lips, and for Shika it's his hands."

Gabrella smiled encouragingly. "So you want to join in?"

Anko shrugged. "Well ok, but I'm afraid my man has got all of yours beat."

"Really?" Hinata asked curiously. "What is Shinzou's best feature?"

"Well you see he does this thing with his tongue where..." She spent about five minutes graphically describing *exactly* what he did.

Hinata turned ten shades of red before passing out in her seat. Gabrella covered her ears and ran to the Ladies room to get away.

Temari however sat there and listened to every word fascinated. When Anko was finally done she said. "Damn it, do you think Shinzou could come over and have a talk with Shika?"

Anko meanwhile sat there and smiled, knowing she had won.

---

"It is our hope that all the world's oceans be joined in peace. So why do the winds and waves now rise up in angry rage?" Naruto said quietly.

"What was that kid?" Jiraiya asked.

"That was a poem spoken by an ancient emperor on the eve of a great and terrible war. It somehow seemed appropriate."

Jiraiya shook his head slightly amused. "I've got to say I never took you for a poet."

Naruto shrugged. "I read more than just jutsu scrolls in my family library."

"Well kid you might want to brush up on your poetry; I've got more bad news for you."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"The Raikage has already sent a messenger to contact her; I'm guessing he'll be ordering her to return to Kumo."

"He wouldn't dare!" Naruto said sharply. "We have a signed contract that doesn't run out for another five months. If he breaks a contract with me it's an insult not just to me but to the whole village."

Jiraiya nodded. "I know kid, but I'm guessing he thinks it's worth the risk."

Naruto looked at the scroll in his hands. "So what do I do now?"

---

Yugito was at her usual spot standing guard outside the Hokage's door. She'd been doing it long enough that no one even noticed her anymore. She'd also been doing it long enough to get used to *not* smelling any fear. Right now there was a slight bit of worry among the staff in the reception area, but that had nothing to do with her. Jiraiya had arrived unexpectedly and demanding to see the Hokage. That was what had people worried.

The door to the office opened and Naruto popped his head out.

"Yugito, would you come in here please?"

"Of course Hokage-san."

Once in his office he invited her to be seated. Jiraiya was also seated and was looking at her with a little too much concern.

"Kid, this is a mistake."

"Maybe," Naruto acknowledged. "But she has a right to know." He handed her the scroll. "Jiraiya assures me that what's on this scroll is authentic."

Naturally curious she took it from him. As she read it she gave no indication of what she thought. Finally she rolled it back up and handed it back to Naruto. "You do realize I am going to have to report that this information has been stolen from my village."

Naruto and Jiraiya both stared.

"That's it?" Naruto demanded. He seemed far more upset than her. "How can you be calm about this?" He opened the scroll back up and read off a line. "The village of Kumo gives up all claim to the jinchuuriki Yugito and agrees to deliver said jinchuuriki to Akatsuki to



do with as they please." He looked up and stared at her. She stared back completely calm. "How are you not upset by this?"

She sighed. "The fact that the Raikage wants me dead doesn't come as any surprise. His fear of me has been growing stronger over the last few years. In that time he has assigned me about eight or nine suicide missions." She gave a catlike grin. "I had the poor grace to survive them of course, and each time I did his fear scent got a little stronger. I know how much you paid for my services, but you probably could have gotten the Raikage to pay you to keep me away for a year."

"I wish I'd known that before." Naruto said dully.

"You do realize that this is different." Jiraiya said. "If they hand you over to Akatsuki you *won't* survive."

"I understand that," she said calmly. "But I've always understood that as a ninja my life could end at any time."

"There's a difference between dying because you ran into an enemy that was too strong for you and being betrayed." Naruto said angrily.

Seeing him so upset for her sake gave her a sudden warm feeling. "Thank you for caring," she said gratefully. "But as a lightning nin I am bound by my duty to follow whatever orders my Raikage gives me."

"You have got to be kidding me! Are you saying you're actually going to let them hand you over?" Naruto demanded.

Yugito gave him an unruffled nod. "What else can I do?"

"Tell them no?" Jiraiya offered.

Naruto nodded his firm agreement. "Your village and your Raikage have betrayed you, you owe them nothing."

"What other choice do I have? Become a missing nin and spend the rest of my life being chased not just by Akatsuki but by hunter nins as well?"

"You don't have to become a missing nin." Naruto told her. "I can offer you political asylum and make you a leaf nin." But to his very great surprise she shook her head.

"That would almost certainly lead to a war with Lightning. The Raikage may not want me, but that doesn't mean he'd want any of the other villages to have me. I won't be so cowardly and weak as to cause a war just to try and save myself."

Naruto looked at her worriedly. "If you won't take my offer and you won't become a missing nin, what does that leave you?"

"It leaves me as a lightning nin with another suicide mission." She shrugged and played it off. "Who knows? Maybe I'll surprise him again by coming back alive."

Naruto shared a quick look with Jiraiya who gave a slight shake of his head. Neither of them thought she would have any chance of surviving an Akatsuki trap.

---

"Is something wrong Naruto-kun? You've been awfully quiet tonight." Hinata asked as they were getting ready for bed.

Naruto shook his head and gave her a tired smile. "It's nothing I can discuss I'm afraid." That was something the two of them had learned. That even though she was his wife and dearest friend there were times he had to keep things from her because of his duties as Hokage.

Hinata had learned to accept this, but being his wife and being very perceptive she sometimes had a way of figuring things out on her own. "Does this have anything to do with Yugito?"

He suddenly felt a bit uncomfortable for some reason. "Why do you say that?"

She nodded. "So this is about her."

"Huh?" He looked shocked.

She giggled. "Naruto-kun I love you, but sometimes you're very easy to see through. If this had nothing to do with her you would have just answered no." Seeing the look on his face she giggled again. "So, is there anything you can tell me without putting the village in danger?"

He thought about it. Hinata was very clever and she had already figured out that something was going on. Maybe she could help him find some way out of this mess. "All right, but what I am about to tell you is an S-rank secret. You can't share this with anyone else."

She nodded. "Of course."

"All right then, Jiraiya brought in some really troubling intelligence..." He gave her a quick run down of what had been on the scroll and then what Yugito's reaction had been. "So at this point Yugito is about to be ordered to leave and there doesn't seem to be anything I can do to help."

"I see," Hinata said slowly.

"I just wish there was something I could do for her."

"Maybe there is," Hinata answered. She gave her husband an odd look he had never seen before. "There is something I need to tell you."

---

A few days after the wedding of Shikamaru and Temari.

Naruto and Yugito had just returned from the tower. As was their normal habit now that they were back in the mansion they both

headed to their own rooms. Yugito was surprised to find Hinata near her quarters apparently waiting for her.

"Yugito-chan," Hinata said in a friendly tone. "Could I have a word with you?"

Despite her outward appearance Yugito could smell determination and worry rolling off of her. She nodded and gave a simple, 'sure' in reply. Once in her room with the door shut Hinata turned to face her and wasted no time getting to the point.

"Do you love my husband?"

Yugito stared at her and felt panicked. "Wh... what?"

"Do you love my husband?" Hinata repeated calmly.

"Love him?" She tried to laugh but it came out as a hollow sounding chuckle. "I respect him and think very highly of him and... and like him. But love him? I am a jinchuuriki from a foreign village. My falling in love with the Hokage would be ridiculous, like something from a silly romance novel."

"Whether a feeling might seem ridiculous or not has nothing to do with whether or not it is real." Hinata informed her in a steady tone. "I watched as you danced with him and I have noticed the way you look at him sometimes. You hide it well, but I can tell that you care for him."

Yugito had faced many difficult situations in her life. The worst had been the slow death of Junsaku-sensei. This had to be the second hardest. She broke eye contact with Hinata and looked down at the floor. "Even... even if I felt *something* I would never act on it. He is a married man and I know just how much he loves you."

"I know you wouldn't." Hinata said. "If you were the type of woman who would I wouldn't be talking to you right now. I'd shut down all your chakra points and then shave off all your hair."

Yugito looked back up at the still polite Hinata. "Are you serious?"

Hinata smiled. "Ask Ino about that some time. But the point is I can see that despite your feelings you are still respectful of me and my marriage. I respect you as well Yugito, and like you." She paused for a long moment. "Did you know that he can have more than one wife? The same law that allows Shinzou to have multiple wives applies to him as well."

Yugito could feel her face turning red as a surge of emotion suddenly coursed through her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean just what I said, Naruto can have more than one wife. When he was away I decided that if it was necessary for the good of his clan or the village for him to marry someone else that I would accept it. I was certain of my love for him and of his for me, and since then I have only grown more certain. When he finally came home he made me a promise, without my asking for it, that I would be the only one he would ever marry. I won't lie, that promise made me very happy. But I would be willing to release him from it under the right circumstances."

"What sort of circumstances?" Yugito asked nervously.

"It would have to help his clan or the village, and she would have to love him. I would never release Naruto from his promise to marry someone who was only trying to use him. When I was a little girl Kushina told me that if I wanted to be with Naruto-kun I would have to be willing to give *everything* for the sake of my love. And she was right, I understand now that only someone who loved him enough to do *anything* for him could ever be at his side. Tell me, would you bleed for him, die for him, walk through fire for him? Would you give everything that you are and ever could be, just to be with him?"

She swallowed. "I don't know," she confessed. "I don't know what it is I feel for him. I don't know if my feelings are that strong. As a ninja and as his bodyguard I am ready to die to protect him. But to give him everything? I... I just don't know."

Inside Yugito's head a lazy voice called to her. **You already know, you're just too scared to admit it.**

Hinata simply nodded. "Well that's honest at least. You think about it and try to figure out just exactly what your feelings really are." She turned to leave. "And just so you know, Naruto doesn't know how you feel and I won't tell him." She left Yugito's room.

---

Naruto was staring at her completely dumbfounded. "Yugito *loves* me?"

"Yes," Hinata said. "I'm not surprised you didn't pick up on it." She smiled fondly. "You always have had a blind spot when it came to women who cared for you."

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

Hinata grinned. "Naruto-kun are you upset that your *wife* didn't point out the fact that another woman had feelings for you?"

Naruto looked a bit embarrassed. "So what am I supposed to do about this?"

"Do what you think is best Naruto-kun, up to and including asking her to marry you."

"But Hinata-chan I made you a promise that you would be my only one."

"In Yugito's case I release you from your promise," she blushed a bit. "I also give you permission to show her physical affection if you wish."

"You expect me to seduce her?!" He looked and sounded horrified.

Hinata looked at his expression and actually burst out laughing. "Naruto-kun do you even know how to seduce someone?" He

immediately began to blush like a school girl. "What I mean is that if you need to kiss or hug her you can, you have my blessing."

Hinata decided she'd spoken enough revelations for one night and soon fell asleep. Naruto remained in bed wide awake for some time.

---

The next morning he was in his office when Jiraiya burst in unannounced.

"A messenger from Lightning just arrived at the gates; he'll be here in a few minutes." Jiraiya told him.

Naruto nodded. "Jiraiya, get downstairs and meet him. Tell him some dirty jokes, do the pervy shuffle, whatever but keep him away for an extra five minutes."

Jiraiya nodded and got going. Naruto got on the phone and dialed Konoha Hospital.

"This is the Hokage, please put me in touch with my wife, it's an emergency."

---

An annoyed looking lightning nin entered the Hokage's office with Jiraiya at his heel.

"And it turned out the girl was actually my date's twin sister!" Jiraiya howled with laughter at the punch line.

The lightning nin didn't seem to appreciate Jiraiya's sense of humor but managed a restrained laugh.

"Welcome to Konoha," Naruto greeted the man. "May I ask the reason for your visit?"

The ninja looked over to Naruto a bit uncomfortably. "I bring a message from the Raikage," he glanced at Jiraiya. "May I deliver it to

you in private?"

Naruto gave the man a cool smile. "Lord Jiraiya is not only a Sanin but also my sensei and a trusted family friend. Whatever you have to say to me can be said in front of him.

The man was obviously unhappy to hear that. It was just as obvious there was nothing he could do about it. He handed over two sealed scrolls to the Hokage. "One of these is a message from the Raikage, the other a seal containing a sum of money."

Naruto read the first scroll, and was careful to display the right amount of restrained anger. He needed to play his part. "What is this?" He demanded. "I don't care if he is returning my full payment. We have a contract and I expect him to honor it!"

The nin looked nervous but answered in a polite and unwavering voice. "The Raikage appreciates that fact and humbly apologizes for the inconvenience. He hopes this will not effect the peaceful relations between our two villages."

"Breaking a contract is an insult. Not only is it an insult to me but also to the entire village of Konohagakure."

The ninja offered a deep bow. "The Raikage begs you not to view it as such. Unfortunately a crucial mission has come up that only Yugito can perform. For the good of the village the Raikage has no choice but to recall her."

"No choice," Naruto said flatly. "I wonder about that."

The ninja bowed again. "With all due respect Lord Hokage may I speak to Yugito in private and deliver a message to her?"

Naruto grudgingly gave permission and had one of his receptionists show them to a small meeting room.

---



There the messenger produced a sealed and signed letter.

"These are orders for you from the Raikage," he whispered. "Do you acknowledge the seal and signature as authentic?"

She looked closely at them. "I do."

He nodded. "Read the orders and then destroy them." He turned to leave.

"Where are you going?"

He looked back at her with a relieved expression on his face. "My mission is now complete. My orders were to leave the moment I had delivered the letter and had you acknowledge it as authentic." With that he left, presumably to begin the trip all the way back to their village.

"The condemned is left alone to face her end." She whispered to herself. She opened the message and read what was there. She nodded, not surprised, and then burned the letter.

---

Hinata was in his office, her byakugan active. "She's been given written orders just as you expected Naruto-kun." She paused for a moment as she read what was there. "Naruto-kun, she's being ordered to go to Ame and assassinate the Amekage."

Jiraiya whistled, "Now *that* is a suicide mission. Being told to kill a Kage in his own village? Not that she's likely to ever get that far. She'll probably be ambushed well before she reaches the village."

"She is coming back." Hinata informed them.

"Could the two of you wait outside please? I want to talk to her in private." He looked nervously at Hinata. "Hinata-chan, are you sure you're ok with..."

Smiling she leaned over and gave her husband a quick kiss on his lips. "I am sure Naruto-kun."

---

Yugito entered the office and gave him a low bow. "Hokage-san I am ordered to leave the village immediately and proceed onto a classified mission. Would you please say goodbye to everyone for me and have my belongings sent to Kumo? You have all been very kind to me; please tell them that I will miss them." She bowed again, "and I especially thank you for the kindness you have shown me. It... meant a great deal to me."

She turned to go.

"Will you marry me?"

She froze.

"What did you just say?" She slowly turned around.

Naruto stepped out from behind his desk. He took a hold of both of her hands and looked into her eyes. "Will you marry me and stay here with me?"

"Did Hinata tell you?" She asked weakly.

"She did," Naruto confirmed. "I know you care for me, and I want you to know that I care for you too Yugito-chan. I don't want you to die a pointless death. Will you stay here if I marry you?"

She stared into those amazing blue eyes. Felt the strength of his hands holding hers. "Do you love me?" She asked. She had to hear it. Even if it was just once.

"I can never love anyone the way I love Hinata-chan." He answered deliberately. "But there are all sorts of love Yugito-chan. I love my mom, I love my niisan, I love Alysa-chan, and I even love my pervy

granddad. Each of those loves is unique and special to me. And they are all very real. I love you as well Yugito-chan."

"But not in the same way that you love Hinata." She saw him struggle and quickly shook her head. "No, you don't have to answer that, I already know and it doesn't matter to me. Even if it is just a little bit hearing you say that you love me is more than enough."

And then she did something she had only done once before. She pulled her hands free and wrapped her arms around him, hugging him. She pressed her face to his shoulder and began to weep tears of pure joy.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you for giving me this Naruto-kun!"

He could feel her shaking against him. He put his own arms around her and tried to comfort her. "Yugito-chan, it'll be all right."

She looked up at him with her tear stained face and smiled. "I know it will. You've made me so happy Naruto-kun! I didn't think people like you existed except in stories. You've given me more joy than I have ever known, and even if it's only for this one moment it's enough."

"Yugito..."

"I can't marry you Naruto-kun. I can't stay here with you. Nothing in this world would make me happier, but if I stay I will put you in danger." She shook her head sadly. "We both know that Akatsuki will never stop coming after me. If I remained here you'd be in danger and so would everyone else close to you. I can't do that to you."

"Yugito-chan I can protect you! I have the entire village to help protect you."

She shook her head again. "You would still be in danger no matter what precautions you took." She looked up at him. "I have to go, but can I ask you for just one thing more? Could I have a kiss?"

He nodded, Hinata had specifically told him it was all right, and he could see just how much this meant to her. "Of course."

His hands gently cradled her face and he placed his lips down on hers.

She shut her eyes and let herself melt into his kiss. She could feel his tenderness and his love in it. It was warm and sweet and everything she had ever dreamed it would be.

It seemed to last forever, and still ended much too soon. She opened her eyes and looked up into his.

"You are only the second girl I have ever kissed," he whispered to her.

She smiled at him in pure contentment. "And you are my one and only." She reached up and gently touched his face. "I will never forget you. I love you."

Though she regretted it she let go and pulled away from him. "Goodbye Naruto-kun."

She turned around and fled out of his office without turning back.

---

Jiraiya and Hinata watched her go. Naruto quickly called Jiraiya back into his office.

"She was crying, just what did you say to her?" Jiraiya knew that this scene would definitely appear in his next book.

"That's not important. Can you follow her without her or anyone else knowing it?"

"Are you kidding? I am the great Jiraiya the all knowing..."

Naruto cut him off. "Just tell me, can you follow her without being spotted by anyone or not?"

Jiraiya could see the kid was really serious and so answered him directly, "yes I can."

"All right, in that case I'm assigning you an S-rank mission. Follow Yugito, when she's attacked contact me so I can bring reinforcements."

"What happens if she actually makes it all the way to the Rain village?"

Naruto frowned. "Don't enter Ame yourself, stop outside of it and contact me."

"Then what?"

Naruto flashed him a look that was hard and unbending. "Then I'll do anything I have to, even start a war. But I won't let Akatsuki kill her."

# Ambush

It didn't take very long.

Just over a hundred miles from Konoha, still well inside the borders of Fire country, Yugito came to a sudden halt.

Standing before her were two people. A man with orange hair and too many facial piercings and a woman with a flower in her blue hair. Both of them wore black robes with red clouds.

The three stood there for a moment facing each other silently. Yugito sniffed the air.

"I can smell the others," she called. "You may as well have them come out too."

"As you wish." The orange haired man answered.

Five more ninja, all of them in black robes with red clouds came out of hiding surrounding her. She noted that they all seemed to have the same strange eyes.

"Nii Yugito," their apparent leader spoke. "Possessor of the two tailed demon. You are the last one I seek. If you will surrender to me I promise you will feel no pain. This can be done either the easy way or the hard."

Yugito shook her head with a laugh. "You don't know anything about me do you? With me it's always the hard way." She activated her demonic power and brought out the red chakra to take on her Nibi form.

Or tried to.

One of the ninjas, a heavy set one, drew off the red chakra and seemed to absorb it. Meanwhile another one actually sent his left

arm flying at her like a missile. It struck her in the belly and she was sent flying to the ground gasping for air. Before she could do anything more the others fell upon her.

---

Jiraiya had only been a couple minutes away when he felt the battle begin, and quickly end. He'd had to stay that far away to avoid detection. Realizing something bad was happening he rushed forward as fast as he could.

He got to the scene of the battle just in time to witness five ninja with Akatsuki robes disappear with puffs of smoke. One of them had been holding a bloodied and unconscious Yugito. He noticed the two that were still present.

They also noticed him.

Pein nodded respectfully. "It is good to see you again Jiraiya-sensei. Nagato asked me, if I ever saw you again, to tell you that he loved you."

Jiraiya stared open mouthed. "Yahiko," he looked over at the young woman. "Konan, it really is, you're alive. Where is Nagato?"

"He is dead." Pein said nothing more.

"Yahiko, you're the leader of Akatsuki?"

The man shook his head. "There is no Yahiko, there is only Pein. But I am the leader of Akatsuki."

Jiraiya shook his head. There were so many questions. "How can you have the rinnegan? What exactly happened to Nagato? Why did you join Akatsuki? What are you doing with Yugito and the biju you have collected?"

Pein stood where he was and looked at his older teacher calmly. "I will tell you this much Jiraiya-sensei. Yugito is on her way to Ame as

am I. In four days I will complete the final ritual and bring forth on this earth the ultimate weapon, one before which no power can hope to stand. I intend to create a creature born of the chakra of all the living Bijū, a creature with infinite power who will carry out my will. With such power at my disposal all the nations will bend knee to me, or they will be destroyed in an instant. There will finally be peace, my peace."

Jiraiya stared at his former student in horror. The prophesy. "You're going to destroy the world. Yahiko have you gone mad?!"

"There is no Yahiko, only Pein."

"I don't give a damn what you call yourself!" Jiraiya shouted at him. "Have you gone insane?! Do you think you are Kami?! However much power you have you are only mortal. Do you really think the heavens will allow you to play god without making you pay the price? What you are attempting to do is far beyond what any mortal should ever even dream of. If you try and do this you will not only cause your own death but the deaths of **everyone** ! You will destroy the world."

At her sensei's words Konan appeared a bit nervous and looked over at Pein, but said nothing.

Pein looked at his old teacher with disappointment. "You don't understand. But how could you? How could an old man who only cares about the flesh understand my dream for bringing the world lasting peace?"

"You'll bring peace all right." Jiraiya said grimly. "But it will be the peace of the graveyard."

Pein nodded to his partner. She cast a jutsu and a pair of large wings made of paper sprouted from her back. She grabbed a hold of Pein's shoulders and together they flew up into the air.



"Out of respect I will not attack you Jiraiya-sensei." He called out as they left. "Tell your Hokage to surrender when I call on him or Fire country will pay the price."

They were flying away quickly and Jiraiya knew he would never catch them now. The ninjas who had taken Yugito had left him no trail to follow.

"So it comes to this," he whispered sadly.

---

In his office Naruto sat quietly in his chair.

"Four days huh?"

"That's what he said and I don't think he was lying." Jiraiya answered quietly.

"And Pein really believes that he can take eight immortal creatures and somehow make them into his pet." Naruto shivered at the unbelievable arrogance. Compared to this Orochimaru seemed about as ambitious as a sixty year old librarian.

There was another drawn out silence.

"Naruto, we have to act. If we don't..."

"The world ends," Naruto finished for him. "I know granddad. But I thought I should take a moment before I plunged my country into war." He pressed a button on his desk.

"Yes Naruto?" Shizune's voice came through.

"Shizune I need some people to come in for an emergency meeting."

---

They were in the meeting room going over plans to mobilize the forces of Konoha and the Grand Alliance to launch an immediate strike against Rain country.

"When we leave I want you to remain here in charge Shikamaru."  
Naruto informed him.

Shikamaru sighed. "That's going to be troublesome."

Kiba laughed. "More troublesome than taking Rain village?"

Kakashi shook his head. "Kiba try and take this seriously, a war is nothing to laugh about."

"He's right kid." Jiraiya nodded. "Take it from someone who's been in one and knows."

"Hey!" Kiba complained. "I've seen war too. I fought when Sound and Sand attacked."

Jiraiya nodded acknowledging his point. "All right, but this is likely to be a whole lot worse. And even if we win we won't pull this off cheaply."

"Does it really have to be this way Naruto-kun?" Hinata asked quietly. "Isn't there some other way to rescue Yugito?"

Naruto shook his head. "Pein is the Amekage, and I'm sure he'll use every last ninja at his disposal to protect this final ceremony. This is just too important to take any chances. We *have* to succeed no matter the cost."

Kushina nodded her approval. "I understand your concerns Hinata. But Naruto is right; sometimes war is the only solution."

"Just how many ninja do you plan on taking?" Shikamaru asked.

"About a thousand, plus whatever forces our allies can toss in."

"You know Naruto with the time limit we're under there's no way Suna can send us anything in time." Jiraiya pointed out.

"I know, but Waterfall, Grass, and Star are close enough to support us."

"All together I doubt they'll be able to give us even fifty ninja." Jiraiya said pragmatically. "It might not even be worth the trouble."

"They're in just as much danger as we are, even if they don't know it. The whole point of the Grand Alliance is that we fight to defend each other." Naruto answered. "Their our allies and it's only right that they help."

There was a knock from the door and an ANBU stuck his head in. "Hokage-sama, Captain Tenzo is here."

Naruto nodded. "Send him in."

Yamato entered and quickly walked up to Naruto. Naruto noticed that his smile was somehow off. He was about to comment on that when a short sword popped out of Yamato's sleeve. Before he could even move Yamato had plunged the sword all the way into Naruto's chest and through his heart.

Everyone was frozen for an initial second.

It was Kushina who recovered first. "YOU BASTARD!" In less than two seconds her katana had come out and severed Yamato's head from his shoulders and sent it bouncing across the room as blood gushed out of his neck.

---

All around him people were screaming but he couldn't seem to make out what they were saying. There was a horrible pain and he could see the sword's handle sticking out of his chest. With the pain he felt his body shake with a sudden weakness. As he began to collapse someone caught him. Looking up he was not surprised, of course it would be her. Her beautiful eyes held such a look of horror. With his last bit of strength he reached up and touched her cheek.

With his last breath he whispered her name. "Hinata..."

Then he fell into the blackness.

---

**Author's Note:** Well I do like to surprise people. Before any of you say it, 1) Yes I am evil. 2) I promise to update soon.

# The Seventh Hokage

**Author's Notes:** I told you I would update soon. I am going to try and wrap everything up by chapter 100.

---

The main lobby of Konoha hospital.

A few nurses worked behind the main desk answering questions and handing out forms. It was a slow day. There were just the usual handfuls of minor accidents and ailments. People quietly came in and politely approached the desk to ask to be helped.

Then in the middle of the lobby two shunshins materialized. Kushina was holding her son in her arms. He was still dressed in his bloodied robes of state. Hinata was standing right in front of her, her face was spattered in blood, her hands soaked in it. Those hands were both planted over her husband's wound. Hinata's face snapped around to the nurses on duty.

"Clear operating room one for immediate surgery! Get Neji down here and Shizune should be here any minute. I also want a full medical team on standby and plenty of type A blood! Now!" The look on her face promised abrupt pain or worse if she were not immediately obeyed. The nurses jumped to do as they were told as Kushina and Hinata ran down the hall towards operating room.

In the lobby there were shouts and loud disjointed questions and statements. It would not be long before everyone in Konoha heard that the Hokage had been brought to the hospital for emergency surgery.

---

Back in the meeting room in the tower.

Jiraiya picked up Yamato's severed head by the hair. He performed a negation sign with his other hand. The appearance of both the head and body changed. The clothing and headgear remained the same. They were what Yamato usually liked to wear. The skin though was much paler, and it was clear that the person had actually been far younger, maybe around 16 or so. The face was still wearing an odd smile.

"Just as I thought," Jiraiya said. "I know Yamato well from our time together. I knew he would never betray Naruto." He sighed. "Now we have to find out who the hell this is."

Kakashi took a quick look. "I can help you with that."

"Do tell?"

"His code name is Sai, and he was one of Danzo's most trusted agents."

"Really?" Jiraiya took a close look at the severed head. "Was he the kind of agent who would take on a suicide mission with a zero chance of survival?"

Kakashi shrugged. "I didn't really know him that well, but all Root agents are fanatics. He seemed a bit more so than the others."

"Sounds to me like he was the perfect candidate for something like this. I wonder what Danzo would say if we were to talk to him." Jiraiya said.

"I'm guessing he'd probably say something along the lines of, 'Sai did that? He must have snapped and acted on his own.'"

"Was the boy strong in genjutsu?" Jiraiya asked.

Kakashi shrugged again. "I don't believe so but like I said I didn't really know him."

Jiraiya nodded. "He didn't use a simple henge; if he had one of us likely would have spotted it. He used a high level genjutsu in combination with wearing the same style of clothing as Yamato. The genjutsu didn't end when he was killed, which can only mean someone else cast it. He must have had help. Also, what happened to the real Yamato?"

Shikamaru had been sitting in a chair during all this. He had shut his eyes and was making an, 'O' with his hands as he thought. He finally stopped and opened his eyes. "That isn't the important question right now."

Jiraiya and Kakashi both looked over at him.

"The important question is, 'what else is going to happen?'" Shikamaru clarified.

"What do you mean?" Kakashi asked.

Jiraiya nodded slightly, he was looking underneath the underneath. "You don't think killing Naruto was the ultimate aim in all this?"

Shikamaru shook his head. "No I don't." He stood up from the chair. "If it was, Danzo wouldn't have used someone who was a known agent of his. Even if there is no actual evidence, if Naruto dies there are a lot of powerful people who would avenge him, you, Kakashi, his mom, Hiashi, Hinata, Haku, and even me. Danzo has to know he could never survive. So why was he willing to sacrifice this Sai character to try and kill Naruto?"

"Maybe he's willing to trade his own life for Naruto's?" Kakashi offered.

Shikamaru again shook his head. "I don't think so. You don't get to reach his age as a ninja unless you have a strong survival streak. My guess is Danzo not only expects to survive this, but to profit from it."

"Which he can't do without a radical change in the power structure of this village." Jiraiya spoke quietly.

Kakashi suddenly looked a bit alarmed. "Are you talking about a coup attempt?"

Shikamaru nodded. "It's the only thing that makes sense. If we go on the assumption that Naruto's death is a means and not an end."

"If that's true Danzo will have to move very quickly to establish his position. If he really means to take control of the village he will have to move within the next 24 hours." Jiraiya stated.

The door opened and a winded Kiba came back in. "I finally found Shizune she has gone to the hospital." Jiraiya nodded. "What should we do now?"

"Kakashi," Jiraiya said. "Try and find out what happened to the real Yamato."

"Right," Kakashi wasted no time and performed a shunshin.

"Wait! That wasn't Yamato?" Kiba exclaimed.

Jiraiya looked over to Shikamaru. "Fill him in on everything we discussed. Both of you should go to the hospital to check on Naruto. But first drop by your clans and tell them what happened, make sure they understand what side they're on."

"What do you mean what side?" Kiba looked confused.

"Also," Jiraiya continued ignoring him. "Stop by the Hyuga mansion and tell Hiashi. While you're there ask him to provide security for Naruto at the hospital."

"Isn't that usually the ANBU's job?" Kiba asked.

Jiraiya frowned. "As of right now the entire ANBU is suspect. The Hyuga have a close relationship with Naruto and stand to lose a



great deal if he doesn't survive. I think they can be trusted, if anyone can."

"And what are you going to do?" Shikamaru asked.

Jiraiya grinned. "I'm going to do what I do best."

Shikamaru sighed. "This isn't the time for you to go peeping at the bathhouse."

Jiraiya sent him a very flat look. "I'm going to go spy." With that he disappeared in a swirl of wind and leaves.

Kiba sent Shikamaru an annoyed glare. "I was only gone five minutes. Just what the hell did I miss?"

"Troublesome," he grabbed Kiba's arm and led him out. "Come on I'll explain on the way to the Hyuga mansion."

---

The phone in his study rang.

Riyuki deliberately allowed it to ring three times before answering. "Hello?"

"Riyuki," a familiar voice sounded strained. "Some terrible news is going through the village and I just learned of it. The Hokage was attacked in the tower!"

"That's terrible!" He tried to make sure his voice sounded properly high pitched. "Is the Hokage all right?"

"I've contacted the hospital but I'm afraid I have no information at the moment. We have to consider that this could be the prelude to an attack. As such I am calling an emergency meeting of the Council at my home. Can you come over immediately?"

"Of course, I'll be right there!" He hung up. In the privacy of his study Riyuki smiled. So far everything was going according to plan."

---

"An emergency meeting?" Chouji asked.

---

"Well of course I'll be right over." Asuma replied.

---

"Your concerns are only logical. I shall be at your home shortly."  
Shibi stated.

---

The small bell at the door jingled merrily.

"Welcome to the Yamanaka flower shop." Ino sang out.

"Hello Ino," her uncle Michio looked grim.

"Uncle Michio what are you doing here?"

"I've come to let you know Ino that as the clan head I have decided to replace you as our representative on the Council."

Ino looked surprised but not really upset. At first being a council member had been a thrill. But then she'd discover how long and boring the meetings were. "Well, that's fine uncle, but does that mean you've changed your feelings about Naruto?"

"Not exactly, I take it you haven't heard the news yet."

She immediately took on a worried look. "What news?"

"The Hokage was attacked and is now in the hospital under going surgery. An emergency meeting of the Council has been called and that's where I'm going right now."

"Naruto-kun was attacked?! Is he all right?"

"I honestly don't know." Ino immediately began shouting for her mom to come take over the counter so she could go to the hospital. All

thoughts about the Council were immediately lost.

---

The meeting of the Council of Konoha was held in Danzo's dining room around his dinner table. Naruto had appointed Shikamaru as president of the Council; since he was absent they went by seniority which made Danzo the temporary leader.

"We currently have eight council members present, myself, Koharu, Homura, Riyuki, Asuma, Chouji, Shibi, and Michio." Danzo began.

Asuma looked at Michio. "I'm surprised to see you here, what happened to Ino?"

"Nothing," Michio replied. "I am clan head of the Yamanaka and I simply chose to represent my clan. I do have that right."

Asuma shrugged. "I never said you didn't, I'm just surprised to see you that's all."

"I decided that in this vital time I should be here." Michio stated.

"We all recognize your right to be at this council meeting." Danzo stated. "Now since we have eight members present that is half the Council and enough for a quorum so we will be able to pass laws at this meeting."

"Aren't we going to wait for the other members?" Chouji asked.

"Unfortunately in all the chaos I was unable to reach the others." Danzo said smoothly. "Given the tremendous danger of this being a possible prelude to an attack I suggest we get to work immediately."

There were nods up and down the table at what seemed a very reasonable suggestion.

Koharu raised her hand and was acknowledged by Danzo. "I feel our first order of business should be to assign someone the authority of

Hokage while our current leader is incapacitated. Since the sixth Hokage did not name a successor, by law we must choose one."

Asuma was surprised that naming a successor would be the first thing brought up. "Isn't that..."

"I formally nominate Uchiha Riyuki as successor and acting Hokage while the current Hokage is incapacitated." Homura jumped in.

"I second the motion." Michio said.

"Very well, I call the question." Danzo said.

Asuma jumped to his feet. The Council normally spent *hours* talking about even the most insignificant issues. "Wait a minute! We need to discuss..."

"All in favor raise your hand." Danzo pushed ahead.

He, Koharu, Homura, Riyuki, and Michio raised their hands.

"All opposed?"

Asuma, Chouji, and Shibi raised hands.

"By a vote of five to three the motion is passed into law." Danzo nodded and in a swift and certain motion turned to Riyuki. "Uchiha Riyuki, it is the will of the Council that you be the successor of the current Hokage and act with the full authority of Hokage until such time as he has recovered. Will you accept?"

Riyuki nodded slowly as though stunned by the turn of events. "I cannot refuse this duty in this terrible hour of need. I accept and promise to do the very best that I can for Konoha."

Danzo rose from his chair and gave Riyuki a deep and formal bow. "Hokage-sama."

Koharu stood and bowed. "Hokage-sama."

Homura. "Hokage-sama."

Michio jumped to his feet and smiled happily as he bowed. "Hokage-sama."

The five of them looked to over to the other three.

"That custom is traditionally performed only *after* the death of a Hokage." Shibi crisply pointed out.

Unsure of himself Chouji began to stand. Asuma gave him a look and the boy immediately sat back down again.

"I will not recognize you as Hokage while Naruto lives." Asuma growled. "And maybe not after either."

"That is all right Asuma, I will not take offense." Riyuki now stood. "I thank all of you for the faith you have shown in me. I promise I will not let you down. Now given how serious our circumstances are I feel our priority needs to be to establish order and reassure our citizens that everything is under control. Therefore as my first action as acting Hokage, I am declaring, per Article seven of the Constitution, the dissolution of this Council. As of this moment I am declaring a state of emergency and placing Konohagakure under martial law."

"You can't do that!" Asuma shouted.

"Actually he can," Danzo corrected. "Until Naruto's recovery from his attack Riyuki is entrusted with *all* the powers of Hokage. I for one am glad for his strong leadership in this time of crisis."

Riyuki nodded appreciatively. "Thank you Danzo, and to show the faith I have in your abilities as my second act I am placing you in charge of the entire ANBU."

Danzo looked as though he were just shocked, but quickly recovered. "Thank you Hokage-sama, I promise you my complete

faith and loyalty."

Riyuki nodded and then smiled. "As my third act I am hereby revoking the law which established the so called, 'Internal Security Force.' The Hyuga clan will not be permitted to carry out investigations or arrests. All police powers will revert back to the ANBU and the Military Police, as is proper."

"Both of which you now control either through Danzo or your clan." Asuma gave each of the five of them a hard look. "You are all either vultures taking advantage of the situation or much worse, you are traitors." He turned to go.

"Asuma!" Riyuki shouted.

Asuma halted and looked back at the man. "Yes Riyuki?"

"I realize you are feeling the stress of the situation. As such I will forget your insult and its implications."

"Don't," Asuma answered. He lit a fresh cigarette and popped it into his mouth. "Because if it turns out that you're traitors I *will* be coming after you." With that he did leave. Chouji quickly excused himself and followed his former teacher.

Shibi stood. "Seeing as the Council has been dissolved and as we no longer have a quorum present I shall leave as well."

With Shibi gone the five of them relaxed.

Not noticing the insects that he had left behind.

"Asuma is going to be trouble." Koharu said darkly.

Danzo shook his head. "Sarutobi is an empty clan. He will come around, or he will be dealt with. The important thing is that Riyuki is now Hokage."

" *Acting* Hokage, as long as Naruto is alive everything remains in jeopardy." Riyuki said. "Why hasn't he died yet?"

Danzo seemed unconcerned. "His wife is the finest medic nin in Konoha, apprentice to the legendary Tsunade. Add to that he has a limited healing ability, as such he was expected to be difficult to kill."

Riyuki sent the man a dark look. "Before I agreed to this you told me you guaranteed his death with one hundred percent certainty. If he survives we will all be executed."

"Naruto will not survive. Rest assured that he will not make it through the night. By the time the morning comes you will be the seventh Hokage."

---

Several minutes later as Danzo's guests departed several bugs found their way out and then found their way back to their host. Shibi held out his hand and collected the insects.

"Tell me everything," he commanded.

---

Naruto was in surgery for four hours as Konoha's three best medic nins struggled to bring him back from the edge. Hinata, Neji, and Shizune poured in their chakra and worked feverishly to keep him alive as they repaired his damaged heart.

---

When the surgery was finally completed he was wheeled into a large private room on a gurney. Along with two attendants he was accompanied by a weary looking Neji, a tired Shizune, and a completely exhausted Hinata. Outside the room three members of the Hyuga clan with ISF badges stood guard. Inside the room Kushina, Saishu, Shinzou, Alysa, Anko, Haku, Gabrella, Kiba, Tayuya, Shikamaru, and Temari all waited. The room was rather full, but no one was willing to leave. Down in the lobby a large crowd had gathered.

As soon as Naruto was brought in Kushina rushed to his side. He was unconscious and breathing on his own. A heart monitor seemed to reveal a steady heart beat.

"How is he?" Kushina asked desperately.

Though completely spent Hinata lifted her weary head. "Thanks to Neji and Shizune we were able to fully repair his heart while keeping his blood flowing."

"That's wonderful!" a relieved Kushina cried out. Her sudden joy was short lived as she saw the sorrow on the faces of the three surgeons. "Wait, isn't it?"

Hinata slowly shook her head. "If the wound were the only issue Naruto-kun would be in stable condition now."

"Wait; there was something else beside the wound?"

"There is a powerful toxin infecting Naruto's heart and arterial system." Neji said with a look of worry. "The blade must have been coated with poison."

"None of us have ever seen a poison quite like this one." Shizune said. "Nothing we've tried can neutralize it."

Hinata nodded wearily. "And it's completely resistant to being removed. It's become merged with Naruto-kun's tissue. There is no way to separate it from his cells structure."

"Then what can be done?" Kushina asked.

Neji and Shizune looked at each other.

"I don't know," Hinata began to weep. "We've tried *everything* and nothing seems to work, and... and he's getting weaker." The girl seemed on the verge of completely breaking down.



Kushina put her arms around her and hugged her close. "It's all right dear; I know you'll do your best." Kushina fought down her own rising hysteria and panic and instead concentrated on trying to help Hinata cope.

Gabrella looked at her husband. "I'm going to the hospital shrine to make an offering to Kami."

"You really think that will help?" Shikamaru asked.

"Well it won't hurt." Gabrella answered.

"I'll come with you honey." Haku said.

Temari, Saishu, and Alysia also decided to make offerings.

---

"What are you doing here?"

Tenzo looked up from his desk. "Oh, hello Kakashi-sempai."

Kakashi just stared at him. "I've been looking for you for about five hours now."

"Really?" Tenzo looked surprised. "Well why didn't you come to my office first?"

"To be honest it was the last place I thought I would find you." Kakashi didn't mention that the first place he'd looked was the morgue. "Have you actually been doing paperwork this whole time?"

Tenzo made an unhappy face. "I'm afraid so."

"I take it you never got the Hokage's message to meet him."

Tenzo looked worried. "Did I miss something important? Naruto's not mad at me is he?"

Kakashi let out a sigh. "Come on I'll explain everything on the way."

---

When Kakashi and Yamato entered the room Kushina had very nearly attacked him. Only a quick explanation from Kakashi had avoided unnecessary bloodshed. Not long after their arrival Jiraiya had shown up with Shibi beside him.

"Kushina, Shikamaru, Kakashi, and Yamato, we need to talk." Jiraiya led them up to the hospital roof where a quiet conversation was held.

"After I left the tower I suspected that if Danzo were plotting something he would probably try to use the Council somehow. I was just able to contact Shibi before he left for the Council meeting."

"What Council meeting?' Kushina demanded.

"Danzo called for an emergency meeting in his home." Jiraiya explained.

"Interesting how neither Kushina nor I were contacted." Shikamaru said dryly. "Let me guess, there were only eight council members present. Just enough to meet quorum."

Shibi nodded. "Your guess is accurate." Shibi then proceeded to relate everything that had occurred in the meeting and afterwards. Along with this Jiraiya and Yamato decided to reveal what they had learned following their investigations. They mentioned the secret meetings of Riyuki, Danzo, Koharu, and Homura. They also related the corruption of much of the ANBU by Danzo's faction. But through all this what made Kushina grind her teeth was the thought of Riyuki trying to kill her son in order to become Hokage. Riyuki would never achieve that on ability, so he had decided to use a poisoned sword.

"Riyuki that son of a bitch," Kushina growled. "Those damn bloody Uchihes, except for Gabrella."

Jiraiya sighed. "It seems that Riyuki and Danzo are trying to pull off a coup without resorting to an actual uprising. What they did with the Council was actually rather neat. They found a legal way to put their

man in charge and even give him emergency powers." Jiraiya shook his head sadly. "He might even pull it off."

"Like hell he will!" Kushina snapped. "That bastard will **never** be Hokage!" Having heard more than enough she stormed away.

---

A short time later she had gathered Saishu and Shinzou in an unoccupied hospital room. She quickly gave them an abbreviated version of what she'd been told on the roof.

"Bastards," Saishu muttered furiously.

Shinzou nodded his agreement with that sentiment. "They're traitors."

Through generations of war and strife the Uzumaki had always held firm to one concept, loyalty. To the Uzumaki oaths and family bonds were sacred. Nothing could ever excuse breaking an oath or turning your back on family. To the Uzumaki clan betrayal was the one unforgivable sin.

Kushina looked carefully at her uncle and brother. "We three are the last of the Uzumaki who were born in Whirlpool. I taught my son many of our traditions, but not all of them. I had honestly hoped that he would have no use for our bloodier ones."

"It seems Konoha is not so different after all. Wherever you go in this world you will always find treachery." Saishu said sadly.

Shinzou was studying her carefully. "Tell us what it is you want little sister."

She took a deep breath. "The Uchihas have been after my son since the day of his birth. He never did a thing to any Uchiha unless he was fighting for his life, but they've come after him without pity all the same, Fugaku, Itachi, Sasuke, and now finally Riyuki. Despite all

their hatred he deliberately went out of his way to be fair to them, and this was his reward." She shook her head violently.

"If Naruto dies I don't want to live. I lost my dearest love once; I couldn't bear that a second time. Hinata has the Namikaze name and the son she carries will continue it. She is a good strong girl and she'll have her father and the rest of her family to help her through." She looked at her kinsmen. "Riyuki is not going to profit from my son's murder. He will **never** be Hokage. I'll see him burning in hell first."

"You want to declare a vendetta." Saishu said. He was not asking a question.

Kushina nodded. "As my blood kin I ask you to join me, but if you choose not to I will accept that."

Saishu nodded without hesitation. "I am an old man, I can think of no better way to end my days than dying to avenge my kinsman."

Kushina looked to her brother. "If you don't want to I understand. You have two newborn sons with no one to teach them what it means to be Uzumaki. And you have a woman you love very much. If we do this we probably die, and if we somehow escape we'll spend the rest of our lives as missing nin."

"That's true," Shinsou agreed. "But Naruto is blood of my blood. And even more than that, he is the one who rescued me from my own hell. I could never live in peace if I let my nephew go unavenged."

"Are you sure?" Kushina asked. "I have to, but..."

"I am the boy's uncle Kushina, and I know what it means to be an Uzumaki. His murderer will not go unpunished."

Kushina slowly nodded, it was his choice, and they were Uzumaki. She took out a kunai.

"If my son dies then I swear that I shall not rest until Uchiha Riyuki is dead. From this life into the next I shall not rest until his blood is upon my blade." She cut deeply into her palm and let the blood spill out onto the floor. She handed the kunai to her brother.

"If Naruto dies then I swear that Riyuki will die. From this life into the next I shall not rest until his blood is upon my blade." He cut deep into his palm and then handed the kunai to his uncle.

"I swear that if Naruto dies then so will the Uchiha. From this life into the next I shall not rest until his blood is upon my blade." He sliced open his palm and then returned the blade to Kushina."

"We have sworn vendetta." She wiped the blade clean. It was done.

---

Hinata wiped his feverish forehead. He had a temperature and his pulse was beginning to rise. She knew the infection was getting worse. While she was keeping an eye on Naruto Neji and Shizune were busy analyzing the poison from the blade, seeing if they could find some clue towards an antidote. They'd had no luck so far, but she had hope.

The possibility that fate was repeating itself was not lost on her. She was a woman who loved a brave Hokage with all her heart. And now she was watching him as he faced an untimely death. She also faced the possibility of raising a son who would never know his father except through stories.

Leaning down she whispered into his ear. "Please fight Naruto-kun; I can't bear to lose you. I need you and so does your son, he needs you very much."

She offered up a silent prayer to Kami that something would happen to allow him to survive.

---

Naruto opened his eyes. He was lying in a field. It seemed to be winter. It felt cold and windy. Up above the sky was an endless grey. There were clumps of dead flowers and the grass was all brown and withered.

"What an ugly place," he muttered to himself.

**Everything you see here is a reflection of your own mind. A** deep voice rumbled. **I suppose you're not in a good mood. But then most people who are dying aren't.**

Naruto sat up and stared. There was no sign of the collapsed fortress. Instead there was just a gigantic fox lying asleep and curled up like a puppy, his nine tails wrapped around his feet. As Naruto stared a single huge red eye slowly opened. That was the only movement as the fox seemed barely awake.

Naruto got to his feet. He didn't just feel cold he felt weakened, and there was a pain in his chest. "This is impossible; you were taken out of me. Is this some kind of nightmare?"

The fox let out a slight chuckle. (Naruto was amazed to find the Kyuubi could chuckle.) **Oh it is a nightmare all right, but it is also real enough. In our years together we formed a connection that was too strong to be broken except by death. And now you are in the same place I am so the connection is strong enough to let us communicate.**

"What place, where is this exactly?"

**You mortal are in a place that hangs between life and death, as am I.** Then to Naruto's amazement the fox actually laughed. **It seems that the great powers have a sense of humor even crueler than my own.**

"I don't understand what is so funny."

**What? You cannot see the joke? For all the years I was imprisoned in your belly you were the symbol of my eventual death. You had the power to destroy me by simply dying. And now? You can die and it will do nothing to me. But you are my only hope of salvation, you mortal worm have been transformed into a symbol of salvation. The laughter came again. Can you see the joke now mortal?**

Naruto frowned. "Stop calling me, 'mortal' my name is Naruto you stupid baka fox."

The laughter abruptly cut off and the eye squinted. **You know mortal, even though it would mean my own death if I had the energy I think I would eat you right now. I've wanted to eat you for a very, very, very long time.**

He didn't like the eagerness in the fox's voice. No longer certain if the old rules applied anymore Naruto took a few steps back. "Why don't we focus on the whole me being your salvation thing? What exactly do you mean?"

The fox's eye opened a bit more. **I mean exactly that mortal. You can save me, just as I can save you.**

"I don't need you to save me."

**Are you certain of that mortal?**

Naruto was about to tell the fox yes when he remembered something. He put a hand over his chest. "I was stabbed."

**Stabbed and poisoned.** The fox confirmed. **Your mate healed your wound but healing the poison is beyond her abilities. She is watching as you fall towards death.**

"And you will save me if I save you?"

**Yes, and by saving me you can also save the other female you want to mate with and your whole world of course. Is that sufficient for you?**

Naruto stared at the Kyuubi. He knew the bastard fox better than anyone alive, and didn't trust him. But in their conversations he had noticed that the fox never actually told a lie. And the truth was he didn't have a real choice. He couldn't save Yugito and the rest of the world if he died. "What do I have to do?" He asked carefully.

**Simple, we must make a contract. Now listen carefully mortal, I am ready to bargain with you.**



## For the Hokage

**Author's Note:** For any of you who may be interested I have started posting a fantasy story on Fiction press dot com. It is listed in the fantasy section and the title is The Girl with the Red Eyes. The address for it is [www dot fictionpress dot com /s/2520841/1/](http://www.fictionpress.com/s/2520841/1/) The story has nothing to do with Naruto or any other anime and is totally original.

---

Kushina reached down and gently touched her son's forehead. He was hot. She heard the small wheezing as he breathed in and out. She looked at the heart monitor and saw his heart beat was rising. She saw the way Hinata looked at him as she held his hand. She understood, though no one would say the actual words. Naruto was slipping away.

She looked around the crowded hospital room. Even though it was now night time and visiting hours had long been over no one had left. In fact, more people had come. Rock Lee had arrived and told everyone not to worry; Naruto's flames of youth were too strong to ever be put out. Asuma, Chouji, and Ino had come together. Ino had brought a beautiful flower arrangement and immediately offered to do anything she could for Hinata.

Kushina looked at all the people who were here now. They were all family or dear friends to her son, and they all loved him. She was so glad to have them here. They were living proof that her son mattered to people. Had she gone down to the lobby she would have found a crowd filling it and spilling out into the street, all of them praying that their Hokage would be all right.

Outside the room there was sudden loud shouting.

Kushina, Kakashi, and Jiraiya quickly opened the door to find the three Hyuga facing four ANBU in masks. It was quite obvious that

things between them were heated. The door was open and everyone inside was looking out into the hall.

"What the hell is going on out here?" Kushina demanded.

One of the Hyuga turned to her. "Kushina-san, these men are ordering us to leave our posts. They say they will take over guarding the Hokage and that we have no authority to do so."

An ANBU in a ram's mask immediately stepped forward. "That's right, The Hokage has ordered the ISF disbanded and sent us here to provide security."

Kushina snapped a finger into the room. "Your Hokage did no such thing."

Feeling her killer intent and the killer intent of the others the ANBU took a nervous step back.

"Stand aside Kushina," an old woman's voice spoke. Koharu came forward to face her. "We are here to carry out the orders given unto us by the Hokage."

"My son gave no such orders."

"I am referring to the acting Hokage, Uchiha Riyuki." She held out an official document. "I have a signed and sealed order to..."

Kushina snatched the paper out of her hand and tore it up. "I've heard about the secret meeting of Danzo's and Riyuki's little promotion. If you think that bastard has any authority here you're kidding yourself."

"Show some respect!" Koharu demanded. "Riyuki is the acting Hokage and will some day be the Seventh Hokage!"

"I know what Riyuki is," Kushina spat. "And it's not Hokage. I have had a husband, a dear friend, and my son be Hokage. Riyuki is not fit to wash their feet."

"How dare you!" Koharu shouted. "Stand aside and go home! Visiting hours are over. The ANBU will ensure your son's safety."

"It was an ANBU that tried to kill him." Kushina answered.

"Stand aside Kushina, clan head or not, if you disobey the Hokage's order you will be arrested."

"Are you sure you want to try that?" Jiraiya said in a friendly voice. "You might want to get quite a few more ANBU first. Or I suppose you could use a genjutsu, you are still proficient with those aren't you?"

She sent Jiraiya a glare. "I am a genjutsu mistress and my skills have not diminished."

"I'm sure they haven't." Jiraiya said quietly.

Koharu looked back angrily at Kushina ready to argue when a sudden commotion came from the hospital room.

---

"So what do you want?" Naruto asked warily.

**I want you to save me.** The Kyuubi answered simply. **Once we have a contract all you need do is summon me. It is a universal law that I cannot refuse a summons; my prison would no longer be able to hold me.**

*I can't believe the Kyuubi is actually offering to become my summons.* "So I'll be able to summon you?"

**Yes, and all foxes will also answer to you.**

"And that's all you want from me?"

**All?** The big fox sounded annoyed. **Do you think it a small thing? I am the Kyuubi! I am immortal and all powerful!**

"Oh really? Then how did you end up getting trapped not once but twice?"

The fox squinted his eye and glared. **"Are you wanting to be eaten?"**

Naruto shook his head. "So is that your only condition?"

The Kyuubi thought for a moment. **I am the Lord of all foxes. Do everything you can to protect foxes on your world.**

Naruto grinned. "You know it almost sounds like you actually care."

The fox in turn looked a bit surprised. **Of course I care, unlike you wretched humans foxes are noble creatures. In any case those are my terms.**

Naruto nodded. "If those are your terms then I accept them. Here are mine. I want full access to your chakra whenever I need it. No more having to get angry and no losing control no matter how much of it I draw."

**I agree to that, but your frail body still has limits. You cannot draw an unlimited supply of chakra.**

"Fine, as much as my body can safely handle. I want all my children and descendents to have the same healing ability I have, including my son."

**Do you not also want them to have access to the red chakra?**

The fox was very surprised to see Naruto violently shake his head. "Hell no! That's way too much power for an entire clan to wield. I want to protect my children and my descendants, but I don't want to poison them with ideas that they're superior. The last thing I want is to turn my clan into the Uchihas." He thought about it. "There should never be more than two members who can wield the red chakra and

summon you. One to use the power and the other to learn it responsibly."

**Very well.**

"Only those with my blood can ever summon you. As long as the Namikaze clan exists only clan members may summon you. If the clan should ever disappear then you can choose any of my descendants. You may never harm or threaten me, my children, or any of my descendants."

The fox grinned a bit. **So I can't eat them?**

"No!" Naruto shouted.

The fox chuckled a bit. **I agree.**

Naruto sent the fox a cold smile. "My last condition, you may not come to earth unless you are summoned. Should all those with my blood ever die out you are permanently forbidden from coming."

The fox's eye expanded. **No! Your world is a glorious playground for me, one that has given me endless delights! I refuse to give it up!**

"Playground? Maybe that's how you see it. Reading through history your visits are recorded as great tragedies, almost apocalypses. Every hundred years or so you appear and bring death and devastation to some part of the world. Well no more! If you are the summons of the Namikaze clan then you are also our responsibility."

**I refuse this condition.**

"Then I won't make a contract with you."

**You would let the female you care for die? You would allow the world to die?**

Naruto faced the Kyuubi. "If I agree to this then I and all those of my line are responsible for your actions on earth. That is a responsibility that I cannot ignore. When my father locked you inside me he entrusted me to protect not just the village, but the whole world from your evil. That was always my curse, that was always my honor. It is my obligation and I will keep it. If you become the Namikaze summons you'll be only that." His lips pulled back in a feral smile. "And to be honest Kyuubi, I think you're too afraid of your own death to refuse."

**YOU DARE!!** Both eyes opened and the great fox's head snaked forward and hung above Naruto menacingly. The jaws opened and he could see rows of sharp teeth and feel the heat of the fox's breath. **You dare call me a coward you pathetic mortal worm?! I think I really will eat you.**

"Kill me and you kill yourself." Naruto stood where he was. Looking up at all those teeth he wondered if the fox really would do it.

For a long moment the fox glared down at him.

And then the jaws shut.

**Very well... I agree to you terms.**

Naruto nodded and let out a long breath.

The Kyuubi brought one of his paws to his mouth and bit down, letting blood flow from it. He set the paw down in front of Naruto. **We have reached an agreement. Now mix your blood with mine and our contract is made.**

Something occurred to him. "Wait, what about the frog summoning contract?"

**A mortal may only have one contract. The instant ours is made your signature on the frog summoning contract will disappear.**

*That's a shame; I'm going to miss summoning Gamakichi.* "Very well." He took out a kunai and cut his hand. He took his hand and pressed it down into the Kyuubi's wound letting their blood mix together.

**It is done.** The fox growled. **Our contract is made.**

With that the red chakra flowed out of the Kyuubi's wound and into him.

**Now live Namikaze Naruto, summoner of the Kyuubi and Lord of foxes.**

---

Without warning Naruto suddenly went into convulsions. His body began to shake wildly and heart rate spiked. Hinata was on her feet trying to hold him down. Everyone was suddenly standing and talking at once. Haku and Shinzou were helping Hinata try and hold him.

Kushina and the others ran back into the room. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," Hinata answered fearfully. "He's gone into convulsions."

From the doorway Koharu looked on silently. She was very careful not to let the hope she was feeling appear on her face.

As quickly as they had come the convulsions suddenly stopped and Naruto lay peacefully in his bed.

Then they saw the red chakra.

They all yanked their hands back.

"But, but I thought..." Kushina looked over to Jiraiya. "How is this possible?"

"Don't look at me, I have no clue." Jiraiya said.

"What the hell is that?" Kiba pointed to the bandages covering Naruto's wound. A huge black spot like spilled ink had suddenly appeared.

Hinata looked at the heart monitor. Naruto's heart beat had slowed down to a safe rate and looked steady. "I think..." her voice was shaking with feeling. "I think the red chakra is healing him."

Everyone quieted down and stared, all of them suddenly hopeful. The red chakra remained for only about thirty seconds, then began to dissipate and was gone. Hinata quickly peeled back the bandages over his chest. Somehow she was not surprised to see the wound completely healed. She was sure that the black liquid was the poison; she quickly and carefully disposed of the infected bandages. She then performed a diagnostic jutsu.

Her sudden smile told everyone the good news. "The poison is completely gone from his system!"

As everyone in the room began to shout and celebrate Koharu quickly stepped away and left.

---

"Naruto-kun, can you hear me? Naruto-kun?" Kushina gently shook her son but he remained unresponsive.

Hinata continued her diagnostic jutsu. "It's all right Kushina, he's just unconscious. His body is exhausted but recovering. He's going to be just fine, he'll be awake again in a few hours."

"Thank Kami," Kushina said with relief. As people congratulated and hugged her she noticed something. "Where is Koharu?"

Kakashi stepped into the hall. "It looks like her and the ANBU have gone."

Kushina and Jiraiya shared a look.



"The danger isn't over yet." Jiraiya said.

Hinata looked over at him. "But it is, Naruto will make a full recovery."

"I don't think that is the danger Jiraiya is referring to." Shikamaru spoke up.

Kushina went up to the Hyuga. "Please go to Hiashi and ask him to send every available ninja to the Namikaze estates to guard the Hokage."

Stepping back into the room she went to her son and tossed aside his blankets as she lifted him up into her arms.

"Kushina-sama what are you doing?" A concerned Haku asked.

"What I have always done, I am protecting my son from those who would kill him."

"What are you talking about?" Ino asked.

Shikamaru answered in a calm, almost bored voice. "Danzo and Riyuki are going to try and kill him before he fully recovers."

"What?!" Ino shouted horrified.

"It's true Ino," Jiraiya said. "They were behind the attack on Naruto. They were planning to make Riyuki Hokage. They have already gone much too far to go back now."

Kushina nodded and looked to everyone in the room. Some like Asuma took the news as a matter of fact. Some like Ino and Rock Lee were openly horrified to hear it. "I expect my son to be attacked some time tonight. I am taking him home to guard him. I ask all of you, if you love my son. To come and help me."

Every last head nodded. Kushina and her son disappeared and were quickly followed by other shunshins.

---

Another emergency meeting had been called in Danzo's home. Unlike the first this one had not been carefully orchestrated and planned.

"You're absolutely sure of this?" Danzo demanded.

Koharu nodded. "Hinata seemed sure and I can't believe she could be wrong about it."

Riyuki sent Danzo a savage look. "Now what?"

Danzo still seemed completely calm. "We have no choice, we must kill him tonight."

"What?" Michio was the only one at the table who looked panicked. "We can't do that! Everyone will know if we move openly."

Danzo frowned slightly. "There is no avoiding that now. The bulk of the ANBU and ninja of this village remain loyal to him. If he recovers we will be crushed."

"So much for your worthless guarantees." Riyuki said angrily. "But you're right. The die is cast." He stood up. "I'll begin assembling my clan."

Danzo nodded. "I will issue an order for all ANBU to remain confined to headquarters for the night. I will also arrange a communications blackout." He too stood up.

"Wait!" Michio cried out. "What are you going to do?"

Riyuki sent him a hard look. "We are going to kill Naruto and everyone who supports him."

"That isn't what we agreed to." Michio said.

"The situation has changed." Riyuki answered flatly. "We must alter our plans to meet the new reality."

Michio stared at him. "Just how many people are you planning to kill?"

Riyuki faced him with hard look. "We have to purge every serious threat to the new order. Namikaze, Uzumaki, Nara, Sarutobi, and..." he hesitated a second but continued. "Momochi are all in the way. Hyuga and Inuzuka may have to go too, but I have some hope they may be reasonable once Naruto is dead and gone. Hinata will have to go as well."

"Oh Kami," Michio whispered. "This is not what I wanted. I joined you to help protect the village from the Kyuubi's pawn. But I never wanted this."

"It's past time to worry about what you want or don't want." Riyuki said flatly. "This is not a plot anymore, this is not just talk, we have seized power. What do you think Naruto and that bitch of a mother of his will do to us?" He flashed a hand across his throat. "This is a war now. We win or we die, those are the only options."

Michio shook his head. "I want no part of this. I didn't join you to begin a civil war."

"That is unfortunate." Danzo performed a quick jutsu and Michio found himself paralyzed. "We could have used you. Unfortunately, as the Hokage stated this is a war." He took out a kunai and approached the helpless Michio. "You are either with us or you are against us."

Without ceremony Danzo cut the man's throat.

It was to be only the first death of many that night.

---

Misaki grabbed on to him and wept. "Please Shinzou come with us! You don't have to stay, your sons need you!"

Shinzou held her and tried to comfort her as best he could. "I am very sorry, but Naruto is my Hokage, and more than that he is my blood kin. My duty is to protect him no matter what. You and Aoi go take the babies to the Hyuga mansion you'll be safe there."

Misaki stared up at him. She then leaned up and gave him a sudden desperate kiss. "You're a fool, but I love you."

He smiled at her. "I love you too." *If only a bit.*

Misaki and Aoi both left each with her son in her arms.

Shinzou looked at Anko who was five months pregnant. "You should be going too."

She grinned. "You want to try and make me?"

"Damn it Anko what about our child?"

"I'm thinking about our baby. With a mom like me you know the poor kid is going to need a father around." He was going to argue so she cut him off with a long kiss. "Listen you baka, I love you and no way and I leaving your side when you need me."

And no matter how he argued he could not change her mind.

---

Kushina came to a sudden stop when she saw her little daughter in the red and black battle suit she wore to the academy. The girl had her sword and equipment on.

"Alysa," Kushina said sharply. "I told you to get ready to go to the Hyuga mansion with Hinata."

"Niisan needs my help." Her little daughter said with a firm and serious voice. "I'm a ninja and I'm going to fight to protect my brother!"

Kushina looked down at the little girl who was standing there so determined and so serious. She was proud and sad all at once. She knelt down and gave her little daughter a hug. "My little one, your heart is strong and brave. You will be a fine ninja one day." She kissed Alysa's cheek and made a simple hand sign behind her back

The girl's eyes fluttered and she fell asleep in her mother's arms.

"But not yet my little one, not yet."

---

Hinata leaned down and pressed her lips to his. "Forgive me Naruto-kun; forgive me for abandoning you like this."

"You're not abandoning anyone Hinata." Shizune said firmly. "Neji and I will be here to keep an eye on him no matter what."

"You know that Naruto would not want you or the baby to be in danger." Neji said. "It will be all right Hinata."

She nodded and kissed his lips again. "I will be with you again soon my love."

---

Before coming to the mansion Kiba had stopped by his home. His mother, his older sister, and a dozen other Inuzuka were present with all their accompanying dogs. There was a mass of people both in the mansion and outside of it. Through the crowd he found a certain someone.

"You ready for this Tayuya?"

"I guess, it's not my first war remember."

"It's not my first either." Kiba said proudly. "You know, anything might happen tonight. There's no guarantee we'll live to see tomorrow. Makes you really appreciate being alive."

Tayuya grinned at him. "You want to have sex?"

Kiba nodded eagerly. "Yes, please." He grabbed her hand and they headed upstairs to find an empty bedroom.

---

Tenzo returned with thirty other ninja behind him, all of them in ANBU masks.

Kakashi looked at their numbers and frowned beneath his own mask. "Is this all you could get?"

Tenzo nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"Danzo has," cough "Put out an order restricting all," cough "ANBU to headquarters." Hayate said beneath his mouse mask.

A beautiful purple haired ninja draped an arm around his shoulders. "Most of the ANBU decided to obey what they see as a lawful order." Yugao said.

Ibiki laughed. "It's funny how most ANBU have the guts to do anything but break orders."

Kakashi sighed; he'd hoped to bring most of the ANBU over. "All of you remove your masks. "We'll definitely be attacked by Root agents. We don't want you getting killed by our side by mistake."

---

Ino quietly approached Chouji and took a deep breath.

"Ah, Chouji-kun?"

He looked over to his girlfriend and smiled at her. "Yes Ino-chan?"

"Ah, well I've been thinking. This is a serious situation and anything could happen and I would hate to die with any regrets." She stood very close to him and smiled shyly. "You know that thing you've always wanted to do?"

Chouji suddenly smiled. "Oh! You mean eat beef dipped in chocolate?"

Ino's left eye suddenly began to twitch violently. "No, Chouji isn't there something you've been wanting to do with me? You know the two of us, *alone*. "

And suddenly Chouji's whole face lit up with excitement. "Ino-chan! You're finally going to let me teach you how to cook?" Ino stared up at him. "Ow!" Chouji rubbed the top of his head.

"You baka I'm talking about having sex!" Ino yelled at him.

Conversation all around them halted and people were looking at her trying not to laugh.

"Oh the hell with it." Ino reached out and grabbed Chouji's sleeve as she headed for the stairs.

"Uhm, where are we going Ino-chan?"

"Guess," she said sharply.

---

As he watched his two former students go Asuma looked over to Kurenai and grinned. "You know Kurenai, anything could happen tonight."

She returned his smile and took his hand. "And it would be a real shame to have any regrets."

Soon they too were headed upstairs.

---

"Gabrella."

The girl turned round. "Yes Kushina-sensei?"

Kushina approached her student and spoke quietly. "Gabrella, you know that we are all but certain to be attacked by the Uchiha clan. I know I can trust you, but I also know how strong family loyalties can be. If you want to leave and avoid all of this I will not think less of you."

Gabrella looked at her teacher with great surprise. "I would think less of me. My father asked me not too long ago where my loyalty was." She touched the hitai-ite around her neck. "I told him it was here. I am a leaf nin. I swore an oath to serve the village and my Hokage. Anyone who attacks my Hokage is my enemy, no matter who he might be."

Kushina nodded, grateful for the loyalty, and sympathetic knowing how hard this would be.

---

Temari grabbed Shikamaru's arm and began dragging him towards the stairs. "Come on lazy, we've got some time before the killing starts."

"You want to do that now?" Shikamaru said not believing it.

She gave him a big smile. "What, can you think of a better time?"

"You know I need to save some energy for the fighting."

Temari laughed. "Fine I'll do all the work."

---

It was approaching six in the morning; the sun would be up in less than an hour. If it was going to come it would have to be soon.

The Inuzuka dogs began barking.

Jiraiya materialized right beside her. "They're on their way."

"How many?" Kushina asked.



"Maybe about three hundred total." Jiraiya shook his head. "I think every last Root member and every Uchiha that can use the sharingan is coming at us." They had a total of about two hundred ninja, many of them from the clans. This was going to be a very bloody fight.

"I'm glad there are so many of them," Kushina said.

"You are?"

She nodded. "I have a **lot** of anger to work off."

The Hyuga shouted out the alarm and everyone readied themselves. A moment later Kushina felt her left arm tingle. She looked at it. She was not surprised to see nearly every leaf on her special tattoo turn black. People were crossing over every section of the outer fence. Very quickly the enemy came into sight. They did not call for surrender nor did they offer terms. Everyone on both sides knew this was a fight to the death.

*They never pay attention to the signs.* Kushina thought. The signs told the whole world that trespassers would be killed. *And they always are.*

She pulled out her katana and screamed. "For the Hokage!"

And with that the killing and the dying began.

# The Killing Time

**Author's Notes:** The tune Anko sings is the 'slaughter' song from Trigun. I saw the anime scene on Youtube and immediately pictured Anko singing it.

---

As the dogs barked a huge smile split Anko's face and she began to sing a happy little tune. " *Total slaughter... total slaughter... I won't leave... a single man alive.*"

Shinzou stared at her. "You know Anko I really love you, but sometimes you scare the hell out of me."

She laughed. "You wouldn't want me any other way." She leaned over and gave him a quick kiss. "For luck." She sliced open her thumb. As the enemy came into sight she sang the last line. " *Let's begin the killing time.* " She launched herself into the air and performed the summoning. A twenty foot high gold and black snake appeared underneath her. She lovingly patted the top of the snakes head. "Eat up!"

---

As the dogs began to bark Ino reached over and kissed Chouji. "For luck."

She thought it very sweet the way he still blushed a little at a kiss, especially considering what they'd been doing a little while ago.

---

Temari kissed her man with a possessive smile. "Remember, you belong to me. If anyone kills you I'll be very upset. I'd hate to have to waste time breaking in someone else."

"Troublesome," Shikamaru said, but he was smiling.

---

Kurenai was with her team. Asuma suddenly realized that he'd forgotten to get a good luck kiss. *Well too late for that now.* He took out his trench knives and focused his chakra through them.

---

Kiba gave her a deep and really passionate kiss. "For luck!" He then happily ran off to fight beside his clan.

Watching him go Tayuya smiled. He would never be Haku, but she realized that it didn't matter. She was starting to fall in love with him. *But if he ever cheats me I really will cut his balls off.* She took her flute out and began to play a wicked tune.

---

Haku kissed her gently and tenderly, as he always did. "For luck Gabrella."

"For luck," she agreed. She pulled out the katana that sensei had given her when she made Chunin. She could see the enemy coming, most of them wore masks; all those that did not wore the sharingan.

*Oh Kami please help me.*

---

Tenten stood on the roof. She had gotten her good luck kiss from Neji before coming up here. He and Shizune would stay at Naruto's side, both watching over him and providing a last line of defense. She and Neji, along with all of the cadet branch members, were deeply in Naruto's debt. That gave her extra motivation to fight. She took out one of a dozen scrolls and released it. She had a huge pile of blades in front of her. With an angry smile she began to rain down death.

---

As the dogs began to bark Kakashi popped a soldier pill into his mouth. He wasn't the only one. He and many others wanted every bit of energy he could get. He lifted up his hiat-ite and exposed the sharingan. He had been a legend in the ANBU black ops, the finest

assassin of his generation. He held out his palm and began to concentrate his chakra. The sound of birds chirping could be heard.

*Forgive me Obito for what I am about to do, but I fear your clan has dishonored your memory.*

As soon as he spotted them coming he got moving. He picked out his target and ran straight for him at top speed. The root ninja in the bull mask saw him coming and Kakashi could see his movements suddenly get sloppy.

*He's hesitating because he's scared, I'll bet he's heard stories about me. Danzo would be disappointed.* The ninja in the bull mask threw some kunai and tried to dodge away, obviously not wanting to engage.

But that wasn't his choice to make.

Kakashi could read his movements with ease thanks to the sharingan and closed in on him. At the last second the man tried to cast some sort of jutsu, but it was too late. With an effortless grace Kakashi slammed his raikiri into the man's chest and into his heart obliterating it.

Kakashi yanked his hand back out again and refocused his chakra to maintain the lightning blade. He barely noticed as the body in front of him collapsed to the ground. He was already looking for his next target.

"That's one." He spotted another Root ninja and got moving towards number two.

---

Hyuga Hiashi was in the very middle of the battle. For the leader of the Hyuga clan there was no other possible place for him. With ferocious power he delivered a palm strike into his opponent's heart. The move was not as graceful or as awe inspiring as some of his clan's special techniques. But it was brutally effective. A single clean

palm strike to the head or heart was enough to kill. His enemy choked up blood before falling to the ground. At his feet were two Uchihas. Hiashi was taking a grim satisfaction in defeating the members of his clan's hated rival.

He was about to turn on another Uchiha when a ninja burst out of the ground beneath him. Before Hiashi could react a long barbed knife had been jammed clean through his right thigh. Even as he cried out in pain he slammed down his top of the ANBU's head and sent a lethal dose of chakra into his skull. But now that his leg was impaled he could barely move. Seeing this his enemies showered him with kunai and shuriken. Unable to perform rotation and unable to leap away Hiashi did what he could to block them. But there were too many and his body was stabbed again and again.

Hyuga Hiashi slumped and then fell to the ground, dead.

---

From his position back in the tree line Riyuki saw his hated rival fall. He nodded, it was a good start.

---

Jiraiya shunshinned away from the mansion and well out past the on rushing enemy. When he materialized behind them he was immediately spotted. Ten enemy ninja turned around to come after him.

He bit down on his thumb and laughed as they surrounded him. "Any of you ever see an ant get stepped on?" He ran through some hand signs. " **Summoning Technique.**"

With a huge puff of smoke Jiraiya was riding on top of Gamabunta's head. The other ninja were nowhere to be seen.

"Good work Bunta!"

Gamabunta flipped his eyes up. "Jiraiya, what's going on here?" The boss frog summons looked at the battle that was raging all around

them. "This is Minato's old home."

"That's right Bunta, this is the Namikaze mansion. And those ninja who are attacking it are leaf nins who have betrayed Naruto and are trying to kill him."

" **WHAT?!** " Gamabunta's outraged shout actually brought the fighting to a momentary halt and woke up most of the village. (Due to Danzo's communication blackout the phone lines were all dead and the civilians could not find out what was happening.) "Jiraiya, are you telling me these men have broken their oaths to their Hokage and are trying to murder him?!"

"That's *exactly* what they're doing Bunta." Jiraiya almost felt sorry for the poor bastards, almost.

Gamabunta pulled out his sword. "There is no worse scum than a traitor." The sword came down like a scythe coming down on wheat. Four ninja were chopped more or less in half. Gamabunta began searching for more ninja to, 'harvest.' He hesitated only to avoid harming those who were defending the mansion and Naruto.

---

Gamabunta's sudden arrival forced the attackers to rush forward and close in. Ironically it was safer to be close to your enemy.

---

An ANBU cried out and stopped moving as he was caught in the illusion of being bound in a tree. Kurenai slipped forward out of the nonexistent tree with a kunai in hand. She was stopped short when the ANBU suddenly moved and brought his own kunai up into her chest. As she clutched her wound and fell forward she took a good look at the ANBU with a hawk mask.

His eyes were red with two small marks in each.

Organizing the attack Riyuki and Danzo had agreed to have a few Uchiha dress up as ANBU. While a few ANBU went without masks

and had a minor genjutsu give them false sharingans. Both leaders understood the value of deception. This would give them the chance to surprise some of their enemies.

Seeing his opponent down the Uchiha / ANBU was about to move when he found himself swarmed under by bugs. Having seen his sensei go down Aburame Shino spoke with rare emotion as he gave a command. "Eat him to the bone."

The Uchiha began to scream, but not for too long.

---

The Ino-Shika-Cho teamwork had not been on display for a long time, but standing together now it was clear that their unity had not been lost.

A group of six ninja came at them; one of them was an Uchiha.

" **Shadow Possession Technique.**" Shikamaru's shadow leapt forward and caught five of them. "They're all yours Chouji!"

"Right! **Body Expansion Technique.**" Chouji grew twenty feet tall and pulled out a metal club. He then began playing one of his favorite games, whack the mole.

The Uchiha had spotted the shadow and leapt away at the last moment. Seeing what looked like an easy target he bolted for a blonde girl in a purple outfit. Ino desperately tried to lock onto him with one of her mental jutsus but he was moving too fast.

" **Grand Windstorm.**"

The Uchiha was caught in mid air and sent flying.

Ino turned around to see the other girl with her fan still out. Ino slowly nodded in her direction. "Thanks."

Temari looked at her and gave a simple nod. "You're welcome."

Ino turned back towards the fight and tried to pick out a likely victim for one of her jutsus. "Want to go shopping later?"

"Sure."

---

Saishu ran forward with his katana out and ready.

His enemy was an Uchiha probably no older than Naruto. The young pup was smirking at him. Saishu had seen that before. No doubt the boy was thinking that no old broken down ninja could be much of a threat. What could an old man do to one of the Uchiha elite?

Saishu smiled.

As they closed in on each other Saishu got in the first strike. He sent a wide arcing slice at the boy's midsection. But the Uchiha could read the movement and was quicker. The boy ducked in close underneath the failed strike, eager to end it and move on to another enemy.

Saishu never saw it coming. The first he knew of his enemy's attack was when he felt the kunai punch into the side of his neck. The boy was fast, but just a little too sure of his own abilities. As blood filled his mouth he could see the smirk still on the boy's face. The look changed to sudden surprise when he felt an iron grip on his wrist. The Uchiha tried to yank his hand free but couldn't.

Saishu could feel the strength leaving his body, but the old ninja had enough left for one final attack. With the boy in close and held in place he brought his katana back around. The boy could see the movement and brought his other hand up in a desperate effort to block. The katana sliced right through his fingers without even slowing. The blade went clean into the neck and only stopped when it hit the spine.

Blood spurted out from Uchiha's throat. The look on his face was one of horror and of shock. As he collapsed to the ground his last



thought had probably been wonder at how such an old man could have killed him.

As the world around him disappeared and turned black Saishu was happy. He had known from the start that he was unlikely to survive this battle. But that was all right, he did not fear death. *This is a good death, I die protecting my family, and I die knowing the Uzumaki will live on.*

No ninja, no Uzumaki could ask for a better end.

---

"Uncle!" Kushina screamed.

"Kushina!" Her brother was fighting at her side. "Don't lose focus! We both knew that this is how it would probably end. He died defending his family, that's what he would have wanted."

"I know," she admitted and focused on a rather nervous ANBU with a crow's mask. "But it still makes me angry!" She launched herself at him.

Back in Whirlpool country there had been many old sayings. (Just as there were many old traditions.) The best known of them was this, 'never piss off the Uzumaki.'

The ANBU threw kunai at her. She spun her katana and deflected them with contemptuous ease. When she was on top of him he tried to fight using kunai. She could have killed him instantly but she really was very angry. So instead she sliced off both hands at the wrist and then cut open his belly with a huge, 'X' sending his guts literally spilling out. The man fell to his knees and began screaming mindlessly.

Shinzou came over and gave the man the mercy of a killing blow. "You're getting sloppy."

"Oh shut up!" Kushina viciously skewered an ANBU in a ram's mask.

---

The Uchiha pulled a short sword out of his enemy's body. Hearing the sound of birds chirping he turned around to see a ninja with silver hair with lightning in his hand.

Uchiha Maldros smiled. "Well, if it isn't Kakashi of the sharingan eye. I was hoping I'd get the chance to fight you."

Kakashi stood there calmly eyeing him. "Tell me something Uchiha. Your clan was one of the most honored and respected. Why are you doing this?"

Maldros smiled. "Because we are the elite of the elite. Uchiha blood is the finest in the world and it is only right that we lead this village. All we are doing is taking what should be ours already."

"Through murder?"

"Don't get high and mighty mister black ops legend. You've probably murdered more people than anyone in this village."

Kakashi nodded. "I've killed and I've assassinated, but I would never betray. Tell me, did any of the Uchiha oppose this? Did even one of you speak against it?"

Maldros looked at him in surprise. "Why would we? For us the clan has always come first. Anything that strengthens the clan we support."

"Even if it means treason and bringing civil war to the village?"

Maldros shook his head. "The village only matters so far as it supports the clan. If destroying the village strengthened the clan then we would support that."

Kakashi paused for a bit and then nodded. "Thank you, that will make exterminating the Uchiha clan much easier." Kakashi ran forward.

Maldros ran forward as well with his sword ready. "Hah! As if you and your sharingan could beat a real... urk."

Kakashi felt nothing as he pulled his hand out of his enemy's body.

"That's twelve."

---

" **Water Dragon Missile** ." From out of the pond behind the mansion a massive stream of water rose into the air in the form of a dragon. It struck the ground right in front of Haku. The three ninjas he had been facing had leapt away and dodged the attack easily. When they landed again they were ankle deep in water as the area was temporarily flooded. Haku immediately used his kekkei genkai transform the water to ice. The enemy ninja were now trapped and immobilized.

Since becoming a leaf nin Haku had tried to avoid killing whenever possible. But he had still been forced to do his share of it on missions. He did not hesitate now. Around them he took the moisture in the air to make solid spears of ice and quickly skewered them. He had no sooner done that then he was under attack again.

" **Grand Fireball Technique** ."

Seeing a massive ball of fire heading towards him he quickly worked a jutsu. " **Wall of Ice Technique** ." A solid wall of ice formed in front of him. The ball of fire struck with violent force exploding on impact. The wall shattered and a huge gout of steam filled the nearby air. Being too close was thrown back by the force of the explosion.

Seeing an opportunity the Uchiha ran forward. Energy blazed around her hand as she formed a chakra scalpel. She came to a sudden halt when another kunoichi seemed to appear before her. "Gabrella!" The woman called in surprise.

Gabrella held her katana out and nodded acknowledgement. "Hello Ichala."

The two women faced each other. They were only a few years apart with Ichala being older. They were cousins and had been close as children, though they had drifted apart once Ichala began her ninja career. But they had always liked one another.

"Gabrella, what are you doing? How can you go against your own clan?"

"I could never go against my own clan." Gabrella said calmly. "But my clan is Momochi now not Uchiha."

Ichala looked at her cousin disbelieving. "How can you betray your family?"

"You talk to make about betrayal?! You who have broken your oaths to serve Konoha and the Hokage!"

"I am loyal to my clan!" Ichala shouted right back.

"Well so am I. And what's more being loyal to my clan doesn't mean I have to be disloyal to my village. The clans are a part of the village, we serve the village."

Ichala shook her head. "You are an Uchiha by blood Gabrella, no matter who you are married to. We're Uchiha, we're the strongest, and we are the best. I know your father will forgive you if you come over to our side."

Gabrella shook her head. "I would never betray the Hokage and I'd rather die a hundred times than betray Haku. He never disowned me or made me feel worthless because I didn't have the sharingan." She saw Ichala open her mouth. "Enough! I didn't come here to debate; we both know what side we're on. Out of love for you Ichala I'll give you one chance. Just turn around and go. But if you take a single step forward, cousin or not, I'll kill you."

She shook her head. "I can't run away."

"And I can't let you go past." Gabrella said sadly and got ready.

"Then there's no choice." Ichala tensed.

"I guess not." Gabrella answered.

Ichala rushed forward and Gabrella did the same. They were both power kunoichi. They both had the sharingan. They were both ready to fight and die for their cause. But one was a medic nin and one was a close combat specialist.

Ichala looked down in horror at the katana that had slammed up and into her ribs. The chakra scalpel faded out. With a moan Ichala fell down onto the ice. Her warm blood began to pool around her.

Gabrella looked down at what she had just done. *I really killed her* . She stared at her cousin's blood on her sword.

"Gabrella! Are you all right?" Haku shouted to her.

The sound of his voice snapped her out of it. He still needed her, she would mourn later. "I'm fine." She called back and hurried to his side.

---

Riyuki looked on the scene with worry. The fighting was brutal and the death toll looked to be high on both sides. What was worse, the enemy seemed to be holding his forces at bay. He could not afford a pyrrhic victory. It would be no success to kill Naruto at the cost of his entire clan. Naruto had to die and he had to die now before Riyuki lost anymore of his people. He was sure that with Naruto killed most of the enemy would give up. It was time now to activate the back up plan.

He turned to the four ninja he had deliberately held out of the battle for just this situation. They were the elite assassins of the Uchiha and of Root. "Go."

The four of them disappeared without a sound.

---

They had brought Naruto down to the basement. It was considered the most secure location in the mansion. In a small storage room a bed had been set up with a heart monitor and an I.V. drip. Sitting on two chairs on either side of him were Neji and Shizune. They could hear the dim echoes of battle. Sometimes a really loud explosion would come through clearly. Otherwise it seemed to all be background noise. Neji activated his bloodline from time to time to see how things were going. He always noted that Tenten was all right. Because of chakra he did not keep it continuously active.

Shizune looked at her watch nervously. "It will be getting light out soon."

Neji was about to agree when he heard a noise from the stairwell. "**Byakugan** ." He saw them just in time. "Intruders!"

The door was kicked down and two figures rushed in. An Uchiha came at Neji and an ANBU in a tiger mask came at Shizune.

Neji tossed away his cane and dropped into a jyuken stance. His old injury would slow him down a bit but he would be all right for the short term. As the Uchiha lunged at him Neji landed a pair of strikes on his arm and shoulder shutting down some chakra points and backing up a step.

Shizune had just enough time to pullback her robes sleeve and fire off four hidden needles that were strapped there. The ANBU managed to dodge or knock away three of them but the fourth jabbed into his arm. It slowed him down but he managed to keep going forward. He would be unconscious in a few minutes, but he could still do what was needed.

As both Shizune and Neji were momentarily occupied. Two more ninja made a bee line for Naruto. There was nothing between the second Uchiha and an ANBU in a snake's mask.

"Naruto!" Shizune screamed. She could do nothing but stand there helplessly and watch as the two ninja stabbed down with their kunai.

Only to have their kunai stopped by a red chakra cloak.

---

Naruto felt a surge of power go through him and it was enough to bring him fully awake. As he opened his eyes he looked up to see two ninja standing over him with drawn kunai. One had an ANBU mask on the other was an Uchiha with the sharingan and a look of fear on his face.

"Hello there," Naruto said cheerfully. In the very next second a pair of hands made of red chakra grabbed them both and crushed them like rotten fruit. Sitting up in his bed he saw Shizune and Neji facing two more ninja. Another pair of chakra arms shot out and crushed those two as well.

Shizune and Neji were staring open mouthed as the arms dropped the bodies on the basement floor and melted back into the red chakra surrounding Naruto.

For his part Naruto sat up and stretched for a bit, not seeming upset at having just brutally killed four leaf nins. "So, aunt Shizune, Neji, tell me what I missed. And why am I in a hospital gown?"

---

"You know I blame you for this." Shinsou said.

"Oh shut up!" An annoyed Kushina answered. "You trying to say this is my fault?"

"Well that's sort of what I meant when I said, 'I blame you for this.'"

"You know there's a reason your nickname used to be, 'shut up.'"

Somehow Kushina actually found it comforting to be bickering with her older brother. They had always been this way, ever since they

had both started using practice swords. Right now they were standing back to back with a dozen mutilated bodies at their feet. They were surrounded by eight more enemy ninja but none of them seemed really eager to get close to those katanas. In all the fighting both Kushina and Shinzou had taken a few wounds and bled a little. But nothing serious, yet.

"So I've decided what to name my son with Anko." Shinzou said conversationally.

"Anko's actually letting you pick the name?" Kushina said.

"Yeah, she says it's because of this thing I do for her with my tongue where..."

"Hey! I'm your sister! I don't need to know the details. So what are you going to name him?"

"Saishu."

Kushina smiled at that. "Well uncle would have liked that."

"Yeah I..." and he suddenly stopped.

All the fighting and all the movement stopped.

Every ninja on both sides, every ninja in the village, and every person able to sense chakra suddenly halted or suddenly came awake.

Because they all felt it; a monstrous and overpowering chakra. Just like one that had been felt three years ago near the forest of death.

All eyes snapped up towards the roof of the Namikaze mansion. Naruto was standing there looking back at them calmly. (He was dressed in the Hokage robes.) Tenten and Neji were holding each other and Shizune was nearby looking on nervously. Naruto was surrounded by red chakra and four distinct tails swung about him.



But unlike three years ago he had not transformed. He was still just Naruto.

And he was angry.

---

In Danzo's home the three of them all felt it. After organizing his forces and sending them to battle Danzo, Koharu, and Homura had come here to await the news. They had received no reports, and Danzo had begun to wonder. Now he knew.

"It's over." Danzo said as calmly as ever. "We have lost."

"What?" Koharu demanded. "We can't know that. We haven't heard anything, maybe we will still win."

Danzo merely shook his head. "If Naruto has recovered enough to summon up *that* chakra then there can be no hope of defeating him now." He began walking to his private study.

"What do we do?" Koharu asked fearfully.

"Do whatever you like, but do it soon. As for me, I think I will take my leave. I refuse to be put in chains and judged like a common criminal. I will meet my end in my own way." He entered the study and shut the door behind him.

Homura began walking towards the door, apparently about to leave.

"Where are you going?" Koharu asked.

"I think it will be a beautiful day. I am going to watch the sun rise." And with that he left.

Koharu let out a long sigh and decided to go home and await her fate. She decided that she would do a little reading. There was a wonderful story she'd been reading for awhile and she wanted to see how it ended.

---

---

Naruto was looking out at the scene below him. His home had literally been turned into a battlefield. The beautiful estates (even the rose garden!) had been burned up, blown up, and pretty much torn up. And there were bodies everywhere, and tragically he was certain that they were not only the bodies of his enemies. Even at this distance he was able to make out the body of his grand uncle.

"All of you who have attacked my home and the people who were trying to protect me. You are all guilty of the crimes of treason and rebellion against both your Hokage and your village. For these crimes I sentence you to death, sentence to be carried out immediately."

He disappeared with a flash of yellow.

All around there was a loud and sickening series of pops and crunching sounds. Kushina saw eight very nervous ninja suddenly reduced to eight piles of body parts. In just a handful of seconds Naruto was killing every last remaining enemy. And these were not clean kills. He was tearing them apart. Heads were torn off and bodies were ripped into pieces. Seeing this butchery Ino and a few others turned away to begin vomiting.

In just a few seconds it was over.

Well, almost.

---

Riyuki was horrified. Such power! His whole clan slaughtered. He was beginning to back away when he felt himself squeezed tight by a fist of red chakra. He was swung about and made to face Naruto.

"You have exactly one minute to live."

They both disappeared in a flash of yellow

---

They reappeared on the outer wall of the Uchiha compound. The sky was getting lighter, it was almost dawn.

"Why have you brought me here?" Riyuki asked fearfully.

Ignoring him Naruto cast a jutsu. The entire top of the wall was filled with smoke. When the smoke cleared there was a clone every few yards all the way around the wall. All the clones pulled out their swords.

"I made you a promise Riyuki." Naruto answered quietly. "Do you remember my promise? What did I say? What were my words?"

Riyuki looked frightened. "There are no ninja left in the compound, only civilians and children too young to have the sharingan."

Naruto gave him a smile that chilled his heart. "I promised you I would annihilate your entire clan, not just the ninja."

"You wouldn't! I beg you Hokage-sama, show mercy!"

"I DID!!" Naruto screamed at him. "The Uchiha clan has wanted me dead since the day of my birth! Your clan has given me more misery and pain than any other enemy! Yet despite everything that Sasuke, Itachi, and the rest of your clan did to me I treated you with respect and honor. I put the past aside and acted with mercy. And you repaid me by stabbing me through the heart!" His cruel smile widened a bit.

"You want mercy? All right, I'll only kill you and leave the rest alone. If you can name one time, just one, where your clan showed me some mercy."

Riyuki stared at him. His mouth opened but he could think of no answer.

"That's what I thought. Your clan has hated me and wanted to destroy me for my entire life. It's only fair I return the favor. Your minute is up Riyuki. I just wanted you to live long enough to know I

would keep my promise and that you were responsible for the final massacre of your clan."

The shadow clones leapt down into the compound and the screams began almost immediately.

Riyuki screamed too. He howled and pleaded and wept. Naruto actually left him alive for another twenty minutes, before finally ending his life.

He didn't want Riyuki to see that he wasn't killing *everyone*.

He had promised to annihilate the clan and he would. After today the Uchiha clan would be extinct. The children he spared would be adopted into new families or grow up as orphans with new last names.

But the Uchihases were gone forever.

## A day of surprises

Asuma knelt beside Kurenai and held her hand as Hinata worked on her

"You're sure she's going to be all right?" He asked worriedly.

Hinata nodded. "She is very lucky the wound missed all her vital organs. She will make a full recovery." Hinata kept a tight focus on her chakra as she healed the tissue and brought Kurenai's flesh back together.

"I truly thank you Hinata," Asuma said quietly. "I know you have other things on your mind right now."

She gave him a small smile. "It's all right, the other things can wait. Helping the wounded can't." She had rushed back from the Hyuga estates the second she'd felt him unleash his power. It had taken her less than a minute but by the time she'd arrived the fighting was over and Naruto-kun was gone. Her immediate instinct had been to follow after. With his chakra blazing like a signal fire she could have found him with her eyes closed. But then she'd heard the cries from the wounded. Her medical skills were needed here and she couldn't ignore that.

Not long after her arrival a Hyuga member had come up to her and told her about her father. She had seen him lying in the grass, proud even in death. He had never been the warmest of men, but she had always known he cared for her. She said a silent prayer and wept, but she could do nothing more for him. She had to save lives and help people who were suffering. Together with Neji and Shizune she struggled to heal the torn and broken bodies that lay all around her.

---

Kushina knelt down and gently closed her uncle's eyes. His katana rested on his chest with both hands placed over the hilt. She gently

kissed his forehead; his flesh was already growing cold.

"Goodbye uncle Saishu."

Shinzou bowed his head in respect. Standing beside her husband Anko did the same. Showing respect to a man who had fought to protect those he loved.

---

The Inuzuka had gathered around in a circle. Within the circle were the bodies of two ninja and two dogs. These were both cousins to Kiba and their partners. Kiba, his mom, and his sister had all taken minor wounds in the fighting, they would all be fine. But two had made the ultimate sacrifice in the line of duty. Alone among all the clans of Konoha the Inuzuka openly displayed their hearts. For them sorrow was not something to be ashamed of. It was only natural to grieve when someone you loved was gone.

So Kiba and the others of his clan put their heads back and howled along with their dogs. Honoring those they had lost and releasing their pain.

Tayuya wasn't comfortable with this tradition. She wasn't the type to ever show she was hurting. But she went up to Kiba and put her arms around him. He looked over to her and nodded gratefully for her support and put his own arms around her.

---

About fifty of the defenders had died along with all of the attackers. After the fighting had come to its abrupt end the first priority had been to help the wounded. Luckily they had three top medical nins on hand, so no additional lives were lost due to late treatment. With the wounded taken care of most ninja had taken a moment to grieve or pray or console another. When that was done most took a much needed rest. No experience drained you like life and death combat.

The next thing after everyone had rested would be, 'tidying up the battlefield.' They would need to line up all the bodies and prepare

them to be identified and then buried. It was finally dawn, the long night was over.

---

As people were still resting Jiraiya approached a weary Kakashi who was sitting down alone in the grass.

"You all right?" Jiraiya asked.

Kakashi gave a drained nod of the head. "Sure, just tired."

"I don't doubt it."

Kakashi turned his head and looked northward. That was the direction Naruto was in. "Where do you think he is right now?"

"The Uchiha compound," Jiraiya said firmly. "It has to be."

Both men nodded grimly. They knew what that meant.

"It's a real shame," Kakashi said sadly. "But I don't suppose there was any other way this could have ended."

"The Uchiha brought this completely on themselves." Jiraiya said flatly. "For that matter so did Danzo and Root."

Kakashi had been in the black ops for most of his ninja career. He still knew many in the ANBU. He shook his head sadly. "That so many ANBU would betray their Hokage..."

"Let's just hope Naruto doesn't decide to pay a visit on ANBU headquarters next."

Jiraiya was only half joking.

---

Thirty minutes after he had gone Naruto returned.

And he wasn't alone.

When he reappeared he was standing by the main door. As soon as he returned he let go of the red chakra. As the power left him he felt no exhaustion at all. He was quickly surrounded by all the ninja who had fought for him.

"Naruto!" His mom immediately ran up to him and swallowed him up in a hug. She began covering his face with kisses between declarations of joy that her baby was all right. Normally he didn't like it when his mom called him, 'her baby' in public, especially in front of so many witnesses. But just this once he smiled and accepted her words without complaint.

Then he heard another woman call out his name.

With a smile Kushina stepped aside to allow Hinata to take her place. Hinata wrapped her arms around him and he put his protectively around her. After several welcoming kisses she pressed her face against his neck and let out a long relieved sigh. She could feel one of his hands rubbing up and down her back.

"You're all right aren't you Hinata-chan? You weren't hurt at all were you?"

She smiled; of course he would be worried about her when he was the one who had nearly died.

"I'm all right Naruto-kun. I wasn't even here, Kushina made me leave before the fighting started."

Naruto sent his mom a grateful look, Kushina smiled and nodded back.

Hinata looked up into his face and let out a small gasp of surprise. She gently touched his cheek. "Naruto, your, 'whisker' scars have come back."

"They have?" He reached up and touched his other cheek. Sure enough he felt the tiny ridges on his skin. "Heh, I guess they have. It



makes sense I guess."

Jiraiya let out a small cough and interrupted the lovely scene. "I'm glad that you're o.k. kid, but there is something we really need to discuss."

The door to the mansion opened and a shadow clone stepped out looking panicked. "Mom! Can you change a diaper for me?"

Kushina gave him one of the most startled looks he'd ever seen. "A diaper?" With the door open she could hear children shouting and babies crying. "What is going on in there?"

Stepping into her home Kushina stopped to just stare. Outside her front door the scene was one of pure destruction. Inside it looked like a nursery that had gone wild. There were children running around shouting and knocking things over. There were babies and infants being cradled in the arms of shadow clones while others were trying to somehow corral the children who were running around.

Kushina turned around to look at her son who had also come inside. Hinata and many of the others were also coming in drawn by their curiosity. "Naruto what is all this?"

He shook his head a bit sadly. "These thirty three children are the last of the Uchiha. They should be young enough to eventually forget what their lives were before today."

"I see." Kushina answered quietly.

"Naruto, just what do you plan to do with these children?" Kakashi asked.

"I'm going to let them be adopted. I'm sure some of them will develop the sharingan, but from now on that ability will be shared among many clans. No one clan will have a monopoly on that doujutsu. Any children who are not adopted will become orphans of the state and be given new names. There are no more Uchihis in Konoha."

"I see," Kakashi replied.

"Is there anyway to tell which of them will develop the sharingan?" Asuma asked curiously.

Naruto shook his head. "Nope, I couldn't even begin to guess what the percentage will be."

"One in three," Gabrella said quietly. "About two thirds of all those living in the Uchiha district were civilians who could not activate their sharingan."

Naruto sent Gabrella a look that was not quite guilty but definitely not proud. "Gabrella, what I did..."

"I understand Hokage-sama," Gabrella said. "Every adult in the clan supported Riyuki, even if they were unable to actively fight. The entire clan was complicit in the rebellion. I consider the punishment just, and thank you for sparing at least some."

Temari walked up to one of Naruto's shadow clones and took a crying baby from him. She carefully rocked him back and forth while singing a lullaby to him that her mother had sung to her. The baby soon quieted down. She looked over to Shikamaru who knew what was coming next.

"Shika, I want to adopt him."

"But I thought you wanted us to have our own children." He protested. He already knew he would be changing a whole lot of diapers.

"I still do, but we can still adopt him." She gave him a firm look and he sighed knowing there was no changing her mind.

---

Kakashi went over to a young boy perhaps four or five and crying alone in the corner of the room. He carefully put his hand on the

boy's shoulder. "What is your name?"

The boy looked up nervously. "Obito," he answered.

Kakashi looked down at him in surprise. "Come with me Obito, and I promise I will take care of you."

---

Yugao and had Hayate had both survived the battle and had already decided they had wasted enough time. They were going to get married and start a family. They decided to adopt a little girl who was probably around three.

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The Hyuga clan elders made the decision to adopt four of the children in the hope that they would one day marry blood Hyuga's and create a new version of the byakugan or sharingan.

---

Inuzuka Tsume decided to take two of the children as replacements for the two who had been lost.

---

Alysa had returned home soon after it was clear the battle was over. The sight of the bodies strewn across her home had been shocking, as had the news that grand uncle was among the lost.

"Please no," the little girl shut her eyes. "Please don't make me look."

Her mother put her hands gently but firmly on her shoulders. "Open your eyes and don't look away."

Alysa did so and looked down at the body of her grand uncle.

"This is a part of what it means to be ninja." Kushina told her. "For most ninja this is how life ends. All of us who travel this path must accept that we may be called upon to die a violent death."

She stared down at his body. Except for the neck wound he might have been sleeping while holding his sword.

"Why?" She asked. "Why must it be this way?"

"We are the living swords and shields that protect this village Alysa." Kushina answered. "We put our lives in danger so that this village and its people can live in safety. You will graduate the academy soon and receive the hitai-ite. This will be your path. Do you still wish to be ninja?"

The little girl looked up at her mother. She hesitated, but nodded. "I do kaasan; I want to keep the people safe."

Now she was standing beside her mother as the orphans of the Uchiha clan were being adopted.

"Kaasan, can I have a little brother?"

Kushina looked at her in surprise. "You want me to adopt one of these children?"

Alysa nodded eagerly. "I want to have a little brother that I can help protect the same way niisan has always protected me."

Kushina thought about it. The truth was she loved being a mother. Taking care of children had always made her happy. She looked over to her son. "Would you have an objection Naruto?"

He shrugged. "Of course not mom."

"You do realize that if I adopt one of them that means you will have an Uchiha as a brother."

Naruto shook his head. "No, if you adopt someone he will be Namikaze just like Alysa. I will treat him as my brother, just as I have always treated Alysa as my sister."

Nodding Kushina approached a five year old boy. She knelt down and gently rubbed the top of his head. "What is your name child?"

"Masaharu," the boy answered shyly.

"Well Masaharu, my name is Kushina, and I will be your new mother."

---

In the end the ninja present adopted all but six of the children. Three boys and three girls ages ranging from two to seven remained.

Gabrella looked at the six remaining children and then turned to her husband.

"Haku, I want to adopt them."

"All six?"

She nodded. "They are all kin to me and I don't want them to end up in an orphanage."

"Do you really think we can take care of six children by ourselves?"

Gabrella smiled. "By ourselves? We'll still be living here for the foreseeable future which means we'll have plenty of help."

Kushina shook her head knowing who Gabrella thought would be giving her most of that help.

---

During all of this Naruto and some of his clones had been sitting at the dinner table working. One of his clones had gone to the tower to retrieve his seal. He'd also sent other clones to other tasks such as cleaning up the battlefield outside as well as the Uchiha compound. He had written up quite a few executive orders, he was finally ready to begin assigning missions.

---

"Yamato, Ibiki, and Ino," the three ninja he'd called for came forward. He handed one order to Yamato and one to Ibiki.

"Yamato, you are hereby promoted to command of the ANBU, congratulations. After everything that's happened I'm forced to question their loyalty. Even the ones who didn't openly side with Danzo obeyed his orders."

He then looked to Ibiki. "I want you to begin an investigation of every ANBU who did not come here to fight. *Every* last one. Ino, given your abilities I'd like you to help."

"What do you want me to do with the ones that are disloyal but didn't actually turn on you?" Ibiki asked.

"If they are Root members arrest them. If they are disloyal to me but have not acted on it then dismiss them from the ANBU."

"Hokage-sama, I hate to say this," Yamato interjected. "But there are still a percentage of the ANBU who have never fully accepted you as Hokage but remain loyal to the village."

"That's not good enough." Naruto said. "Danzo and his Root members could have said the exact same thing. The ANBU are expected to be the personal weapons of the Hokage. If any do not feel they can perform that role then they cannot be ANBU, though they may continue to serve as regular ninja."

"It will take weeks to sort out the entire ANBU." Ibiki said.

"Take as long as you need." Naruto said. "Just make sure I can trust whoever is left."

Naruto pulled out four more scrolls. "Jiraiya and Kakashi, take however many ninja you want but find Danzo, Koharu, Homura, and Michio. These are warrants for their arrest. Take them alive if at all possible."

He took several more scrolls out. "Shikamaru and Shizune, please go to the tower and put these new orders into effect."

Shikamaru took the orders and began looking through them. All the orders from Danzo and Riyuki were officially declared invalid. Naruto was activating Article Seven to place Konoha under martial law. (Thereby following the example of what Riyuki had done less than 24 hours earlier.) He was ordering the gates shut and all ninja missions suspended. The Uchiha properties as well as the properties of all rebels were confiscated. The Uchiha compound was restricted and made off limits to all except those with the express permission of the Hokage.

Shikamaru nodded as all the orders made good sense, until he got to the last one. He quirked an eyebrow and looked at Naruto.

"Harming any fox is hereby made a crime punishable by fine of 50,000 ryu and up to six months sentence of forced confinement. Killing any fox is hereby made a crime punishable by a fine up to 200,000 ryu and up to three years sentence of hard labor. Naruto what does this have to do with putting things back in order?"

"Nothing," Naruto admitted. "It's part of a promise I made."

"Listen kid all this is really great." Jiraiya interjected. "But there's something we really do need to talk about that can't wait." He looked about the crowded room. "Maybe we should go somewhere and talk in private."

"If this has to do with the little fact that Naruto has the Kyuubi's chakra again don't bother." Shikamaru said. "Everyone in the village who can sense chakra knows. And I think everyone would really appreciate an explanation."

"Shikamaru does have a point kid. The Kyuubi was extracted from you so how can you have his chakra again?"

Naruto shrugged, this wasn't going to be a secret. "I made a contract with the Kyuubi and with the foxes."

In a day that had been absolutely full of surprises that statement left the room silent.

"Troublesome," Shikamaru said.

Jiraiya shook his head not believing it. "Kid you can't bargain with one of the biju, it's impossible. And I happen to know for a fact that there is no such thing as a fox contract."

"Oh really?" Naruto bit his thumb and performed the hand signs. "**Summoning Technique.**" There was a small puff of smoke. When the smoke had cleared a large red fox sat patiently at Naruto's feet.

Jiraiya gaped at the small animal. "That's impossible!"

"So?" Naruto smiled.

---

Kakashi and Jiraiya had not expected to find Danzo in his home. They had gone there simply in hopes of finding some clue as to his true location. But he had been there. They found him lying on the floor of his study surrounded by a pool of blood. A short sword driven through his chest, his body already growing cold.

"Bastard took the easy way out." Jiraiya complained.

Given his own past Kakashi had never thought well of suicide, but he merely shrugged. "Well, at least he knew better than to try and run once he'd lost."

"What do you think of poor Michio?" They had found his body lying in the basement, obviously dead for some hours.

"I'm guessing he probably got cold feet." Kakashi said.



"Brave enough to rebel but not actually fight?" Jiraiya shook his head in disgust. "At least Danzo and Riyuki had the courage of their convictions."

"If they hadn't there would be a lot more people alive right now."

Jiraiya merely grunted. Kakashi was right, but if there was one thing Jiraiya truly admired it was guts, even when those guts were used in a bad cause. "Well let's see if we can find the other two as easily."

---

Capturing Koharu and Homura actually proved very easy. Both were found in their homes and offered no resistance. After a long interrogation session assisted by Ino the two of them were sent to the Tower where Naruto now was. Under heavy guard, but without chains they were marched into the Hokage's office where the Hokage awaited. Having dealt with the combined forces of Uchiha and Root Naruto felt confident he could deal with these two.

He allowed them to approach his desk and placed two pieces of paper and two pens in front of them.

"Following your interrogations it is clear that you both conspired with Danzo and Riyuki to overthrow me and place Riyuki as head of the government. What is more, you Koharu directly assisted in the attempt on my life by placing a genjutsu on my would be assassin."

"That is true." Koharu admitted. It had come out during the interrogation so there was no point in denying it now.

"We will not plead for mercy; we know the punishment for our actions." Homura said calmly.

"You both deserve death." Naruto told them flatly, but then gave a disappointed shake of his head. "However you were both the friends and teammates of the Third Hokage. Out of respect for him I will show you both mercy." He nodded towards the paper and pens. "Each of you write out a resignation, not only from the Council but

from the village as well. Then take off your hitai-ites. I will give you one hour to leave this village with whatever you can carry. The rest of your possessions will be confiscated. Go wherever you like so long as it is at least two hundred miles from Konoha."

"Banishment?" Koharu said in surprise.

"That's right."

"I was born in this village, it is the only home I have ever known." Koharu protested.

"You should have thought of that before you rebelled." Naruto said coldly. "I am already showing you more mercy than you deserve and more than I showed the Uchiha. Your only options are exile or immediate execution."

In the end they both decided to write out their resignations and surrender their hitai-ites.

---

Gamabunta looked down at the young man. Jiraiya had again summoned him to the Namikaze estates. Not to fight this time, but to instead hear Naruto's apology for giving up the frog summoning contract.

"I am truly sorry," Naruto told him. "It was a huge honor to be able to work with you and your brethren. I especially enjoyed working with Gamakichi."

Gamabunta slowly nodded. "Don't worry about it; it sounds to me like you had no real choice. Besides, I faced the Kyuubi; I'm willing to admit I'm not in his class when it comes to raw power. I am very sorry to lose you though. I cared for your father and you were a good henchman."

"In that case would you consider letting my uncle sign the contract? It would mean a lot to me if the frogs could become the Uzumaki

clan summons."

"Hmmm, I'll think about it." With that Gamabunta disappeared with a huge puff of smoke.

It was now late afternoon. The bodies had been cleared out. The damage to the estates would take much longer to repair. Everyone in the village now knew that there had been an unsuccessful coup attempt. They also knew that the Uchiha clan had been wiped out except for some children. The fact that Naruto had regained the power of the Kyuubi had also been announced, but the specifics were left out for now. The Military Police were gone of course; the non Uchiha members had all been arrested for their part in supporting the coup. But the ISF and at least part of the ANBU were functioning to maintain order. Still, it would still take awhile to fully restore things.

"Kid we need to talk."

"What about pervy granddad?"

"In case you've forgotten the Akatsuki still have Yugito. She only has three days left and this one is mostly gone. It will take a full day to reach Ame. We have to begin assembling an army immediately."

Jiraiya was surprised to see Naruto shake his head. "I haven't forgotten about her or about the Akatsuki. But I won't be taking the army. I have something else in mind."

"Like what kid?"

Naruto told him.

Jiraiya stared at him. "Are you serious?"

"When it comes to my precious people I am always serious."

"Kid what you're wanting to do it's... it's..." Jiraiya was trying to find a word strong enough.

"According to your prophesy there are only two options." Naruto said quietly. "Either I bring the world peace or I bring total destruction. Nothing in between right? If those are the stakes I can't hold back."

Jiraiya could only nod. "In that case kid I want to ask you a favor."

---

Walking back into his home he could smell dinner cooking and wandered into the kitchen.

"Is that your ramen I smell?"

Looking up from the stove Kushina smiled and nodded. "It is, I think you deserve a special treat tonight."

"Thanks mom. Listen I have to go take care of something and it will probably take about an hour so I may be a little late to dinner."

"That's fine son, what are you taking care of?"

"Well I'm about to go rescue Yugito, exterminate Akatsuki, save the world, and probably level most of Rain village." He thought about it for a second. "Yeah, an hour should about do it."

Kushina gawked at her son. This really was a day for surprises. "Naruto..."

"Bye mom." He disappeared in a yellow flash.

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Somewhere in a grey void the Kyuubi opened an eager eye.

And began to grin.

## Settle all accounts

**Author's Notes:** All right, I know I said I wanted to end the story at chapter 100. Unfortunately doing that would require making an uber long chapter which I don't think would flow well. So I am going to write an epilogue and officially end this story on chapter 101. I trust people won't be too upset by that.

Some of you have asked about a sequel to this story. Well I have decided instead to write a prequel. I have already posted it; it's called A Mother's Love: The Life of Kushina. So one more chapter to go.

---

Upon their return to the rain village everything had been prepared. All the surviving members of Akatsuki were present. For this final ceremony he had required them all to be here. As Amekage he had alerted all his ninja to secure not only the temple but the village from possible attack. The moment was finally at hand, a new golden age of peace. With the power he would have at his disposal he would become a new emperor and each of the Akatsuki would be given a part of the world to rule over as warlords in his name. And any who disturbed his peace would meet a swift end.

---

"It is almost time," he said calmly. "In three days the ceremony of transformation will be completed and a new all powerful biju will be born."

Konan looked at him nervously. She had believed in him, followed him, fought at his side, and she had always trusted him. But now that they were nearly to the end her doubts weren't just whispering to her they were shouting. "Pein are you sure?" She asked quietly.

He looked over to her. "What do you mean?"

She took a deep breath. "I am wondering about what Jiraiya-sesnei said. He thought that this was... madness."

"He simply does not understand," Pein reassured her. "How could he? He is old and set in his ways, his mind closed to new possibilities."

She looked at him with worry. "He said we would destroy the world."

"He would say *anything* to try and stop us. But I won't let his words stop me, especially not now that I am so close." He looked at her imploringly. "You aren't worried are you?"

She set herself and decided to finally tell him the truth. "I have always been worried about this. But out of loyalty for you I have always set my fears aside. The final goal is noble and worthwhile, who could possibly be against lasting peace? But, but to *create* a biju? Does that not seem like madness to you?"

"The master jutsu will work." Pein said firmly. He refused to listen to any doubt. "Have I ever failed you Konan or let you down?"

"No, never, not even once."

"Then trust in me just once more." He held out his hand to her. "I cannot do this without you."

And once more, as in so many other times she decided to set aside her fears and trust in him. She reached out and took his hand.

"I trust in you," she said. "To the end."

---

The abandoned temple that had been their secret base was no longer abandoned. A hundred rain ninja stood guard inside and immediately outside of it. Beyond the village walls his ninja were patrolling aggressively searching for any possible threat. Within the temple some of his men not only watched but chanted and spoke

prayers. Many of them wanted to worship him as a living god. Pein had already decided that once he ruled the world he would allow a cult to be formed. It might make a useful tool.

As his men watched the members of Akatsuki performed the ceremony. They stood on the fingers of the great statue as the chakra was slowly extracted from the last jinchuuriki.

"So just what happens once this ultimate biju is created?" Kabuto asked.

"I will send it out to destroy one of the ninja villages as a demonstration of my power." Pein replied. "Then I will give all of them the chance to surrender to me and spare their lands."

"Which village?" Sasori questioned.

"Kumo," Pein answered.

Sasori chuckled. "So much for the non aggression treaty."

"Yeah," Deidara said cheerfully. "I say blow up Iwa!"

"I have made my choice," Pein answered. "If after I demonstrate my power Iwa refuses to surrender then they will be destroyed."

"Who the fuck cares anyway?" Hidan sounded annoyed. "I'm just glad there won't be anymore of these damn long ass ceremonies."

"You're kidding right?" Kakuzu said. "I thought you loved long ceremonies."

"Only when they fucking involve Jashin!"

Kakuzu laughed. "Well I'm just looking forward to being a warlord. Making a fortune will be too easy then. So what lands will I rule?"

"Tobi wants to be the boss in Fire country and make all the leaf nins serve Tobi, especially the ones with red eyes."

"You mean the Uchiha." Kabuto clarified.

Tobi's head nodded up and down. "Thank you Kabuto-sempai, yes Tobi wants the Uchihas to be Tobi's slaves."

"I have already agreed to that." Pein said. "Konoha and all of Fire country will be yours to do with as you please. Provided they are wise enough to surrender of course."

"The Uchiha will be slaves or ashes either one makes Tobi happy."

Kabuto looked at him curiously. "Why the sudden interest in the Uchiha?"

"They were mean to Tobi a long time ago, so Tobi does not like them."

The conversation was brought to a sudden halt by a yellow flash down next to Yugito.

---

The Akatsuki never bothered to search the jinchuuriki who were brought in for extraction. When Naruto had been captured he'd been wearing a necklace worth a pair of goldmines and the mountains on top of them. No one had bothered to remove it from him. Just as a no one had thought to check Yugito's packs where a tri kunai was located.

---

The instant Naruto appeared a hundred kunai and shuriken came down on him. He didn't bother trying to avoid them. The red chakra simply appeared and they bounced away harmlessly. Since making the contract he had discovered that the red chakra now acted as an ultimate defense, protecting him from danger even if he was unaware of it.

"Stop!" Pein shouted. "If any of you harm the jinchuuriki by mistake I will have you killed."



"Her name is Yugito!" Naruto called out. "And she is not the one in danger now."

She was floating suspended in the air as chakra was slowly being drawn from her mouth and eyes. He put his hands on her shoulders and willed the red chakra to flow out around her until they were both protected by it. She remained unconscious with chakra oozing out of her.

"What do you think you are doing?!" Pein demanded. "You have no idea what you are interfering with."

"Actually Pein you're the one who has no idea. You may be pretty smart when it comes to jutsu but what you're doing here will only end in disaster, it will not only fail it will destroy the world."

Pein shook his head. "I can control this power."

"No you can't, even if you do think you're kami you're not." Naruto said. "And only Kami could do what you have in mind, create a living being."

"You know nothing," Pein replied. "What I am doing will bring the world peace."

Naruto shrugged. "I suppose that's true at any rate. I mean with everyone dead there won't be any more fighting. But that's not the sort of peace I want." Naruto looked at him. "You want peace and you want to protect your village. I can understand that because I want those things too, but the path you've chosen is the wrong one."

"It is the only one." Pein stated. "We live in a world filled with blood and violence, filled with small men who prey upon the weak. In such a world peace must be imposed, and for it to be a lasting peace it must be imposed by a power so great none would ever try to oppose it."

"And what good does it do you if you're destroyed trying to gain this power?" Naruto sighed and looked around at all the people present. He knew how this was going to end, but he would keep his promise. "Jiraiya asked me to tell you, that he was sorry for failing you, Konan, and Nagato. He says he should have kept you with him and made sure that you were all right. He wants you to know that he did what he thought best at the time and was sorry that it was not enough."

Konan seemed genuinely moved while Pein nodded. "For what it is worth I do not blame Jiraiya. He was a foreigner and he owed us nothing, what he did for us was a great kindness and for that he will always have my thanks and my respect."

"He also asked me to make you and Konan a last offer. End your efforts at acquiring the biju, release Yugito, and agree to disband Akatsuki and I will leave you in peace and never return."

Pein looked him with a slight frown. "You are in no position to dictate to me. I fully acknowledge you are a powerful ninja, but Itachi was able to defeat you. What can you do against not only all of Akatsuki but an entire village was well?"

"Annihilate you," Naruto answered quietly. "Please believe me when I say I have power enough to destroy you all. I would rather not do that, but I am here today to settle all accounts and end the threat of Akatsuki once and for all."

"I cannot be bluffed," Pein said.

Sasori suddenly spoke up. "The demonic chakra, how are you able to wield it? You no longer possess the Kyuubi."

"I have a contract with the Kyuubi, which means all his power is at my disposal." Naruto said calmly.

The surprise was obvious on most of their faces, behind him he could hear the rain nin suddenly whispering to one another.

"That is a lie." Pein accused loudly. All the whispers halted. "Perhaps you do somehow retain a small remnant of the Kyuubi's power, but that is nothing that we cannot handle." Around Naruto five ninja suddenly appeared in puffs of smoke. They were all wearing the black robes with red clouds. They had something else in common as well.

"They all have the same doujutsu, the rinnegan I suppose." Naruto noted.

"That is correct; these are the six paths of Pein."

Naruto halted for a moment and then began to laugh.

"You find something amusing in all this?"

Naruto needed a moment before he could talk. "Sorry, it's just that Itachi told me that you were six just before he died. It drove me crazy trying to figure out what he meant."

"My other selves are extremely formidable." Pein explained. "You will be no match for them."

"Really?" Five arms of red chakra leapt out. They were too close to dodge and all five were caught. Naruto wasted no time in crushing them and sending their blood spewing into the air. "Is that all it comes down to? Who has more power?" One by one, four tails emerged from out of the red chakra.

The ordinary ninja in the temple began to carefully back away from him. The only thing that kept them from running was that their god was watching. As for the Akatsuki all of them began looking very nervous except for Pein and the one in the orange mask.

"How can you have this level of power without the Kyuubi inside you?" Kabuto asked.

"I already told you," Naruto took out a kunai. "I have a contract with the Kyuubi."

"That is impossible." Pein said firmly. "The Kyuubi is bound within this prison."

Naruto just smiled. "Funny thing, people keep telling me the things I do are impossible, and I just keep doing them anyway. Now I'll give you one final chance to spare your village and yourself. Give this up."

"Never," he answered. Konan looked very fearful.

"All right then, let me show you my real power." With that he sliced open his palm. "I don't suppose that any of you are seal masters by any chance?" Seeing their stares he shook his head. "I don't suppose it matters, none of you strike me as the self sacrificing type." He performed a few hand signs. " **Summoning of the Kyuubi.**"

With that the earth immediately began to shake. Naruto wrapped both arms around Yugito protectively and expanded the chakra out around them into the shape of a small dome. Along with the violent shaking came the sound of cracking as stone began to split apart. Tiles and chunks of brick and marble began to rain down. Some of the Ame began panicking and started to run, the rest took cover as best they could.

The temple was not the only thing breaking.

The fingers went first. The hands of the grotesque statue snapped and crashed down onto the temple floor. The Akatsuki who had been standing on them leapt away without trouble.

"What the fuck is going on here?!" Hidan shouted.

"It's beautiful, yeah!" Deidara created a large clay bird and hopped onto its back.

Sasori landed a safe distance away and simply eyed Naruto. His bulky body did not seem to feel the debris falling on him.

Kabuto had always had an excellent sense of self preservation, and it was telling him to get out. He quickly disappeared.

Konan created a large pair of wings to shelter under. She stood near Pein so that she could protect him as well. "We should get out of here!" She yelled to him.

He did not hear her. All he could see or hear was the main part of the statue and the large crack running down the middle of it. Pein stood there and stared at it fascinated, drawn to it like a moth to a flame. And as the crack widened he saw the most beautiful white light.

Konan could feel the power mounting behind the crack and she felt terror. Her first impulse was to get away and save herself, but she couldn't abandon him. She grabbed his shoulder and shook him roughly, screaming at him. "Pein! We have to go! It's going to..."

The word she would have used was explode, but it never left her mouth. All at once the prison gave way and the power inside was released. The explosion was like 10,000 tags going off at once. The temple and everything within ten city blocks was leveled and completely destroyed. Everyone in the blast radius died immediately.

Except for Naruto and Yugito.

When the explosion ended he saw six forms of pure white light race into the sky like comets. They headed into different directions and were quickly gone from sight. Some of the light flowed rapidly back into Yugito. That too was quickly gone from sight. With all the chakra returned to her Yugito seemed to breathe easier, though she remained unconscious.

That left one light hanging in the air above them. As Naruto watched it began to thicken and expand, growing in size and in mass. The light that had started out as pure white began to take on a reddish

tint. The huge lump began to grow four legs and a head with a snout. Nine distinct tails grew. The legs slammed down into the crater that had once been a temple. The monster reared his head back and let loose a long and blood thirsty howl.

After sixteen years the Kyuubi once more walked the earth.

Naruto found himself again staring up at the monster. Only this time it wasn't a dreamscape, he was in the real world and he had just set the Kyuubi free. A little late he wondered if contracts without paper were binding.

"Kyuubi!" He shouted.

The creature's huge head bent down and two orange eyes looked down at him. The lips pulled back to reveal two long rows of teeth.

**Well it looks like you have kept your end of the bargain and I shall keep mine.**

"Well that is really, really, good to know. So you have to obey me right?"

The eyelids came down a bit. **Yes.**

"All right, did any of the Akatsuki survive?"

The fox nodded his huge head. **Yes, two members, Uchiha Madera and Yakushi Kabuto.**

"An Uchiha!" Naruto shouted. "You mean there was another Uchiha in Akatsuki besides Itachi?"

**Madera was the original founder of Akatsuki.** The fox grinned. There was much more but he deliberately chose not to share.

"Oh well he's not going to be recruiting any new members. I want them both dead."

**Done!** The Kyuubi grinned down at him. **You realize of course that there will be a certain amount of collateral damage.**

"Which is your way of saying you're going to level most of the village to get them." Naruto frowned but nodded. "Cause as little damage and loss of life as possible, but I want Akatsuki destroyed once and for all."

Laughing the fox leapt away eager to finally get to play again after his long confinement.

---

Madera had thrown away his mask and was fleeing in mindless terror. A huge paw came crashing down in front of him and he was forced to stop.

**Oh you can do better than that.** The fox laughed. **Give me a good chase before I eat you.**

Madera shook as he looked up at the face of the grinning beast. "You cannot do this! We have a contract!"

The fox's laughter boomed out again. **We had a contract. It was broken the instant you imprisoned me. Now run some more, I am having fun!**

His ability to become intangible was useless against the Kyuubi. He was left with no choice but to run again. Like a cat (or fox) playing with a mouse the Kyuubi gave chase.

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The Kyuubi eventually returned with the half chewed up body of Kabuto which he promptly spat out. The Uchiha he had eaten. With the fight over Naruto dismissed the Kyuubi. He took a quick survey of the village. From what he could see there weren't many buildings left standing. He was sure the people of Rain country would blame him for releasing the Kyuubi. But Akatsuki was at long last completely gone. To him that was a victory no matter the cost.

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Yugito slowly opened her eyes. She looked up to see the face that she most wanted to see. "Naruto? Is that you?"

He gave her a smile. "Afraid so."

She reached up and gently touched his cheek with her hand. "You have whiskers?"

He laughed. "I'll explain later."

"You came for me?" She shook her head.

"Yeah, I did."

She just stared up at him. She felt pretty weak, but she was in his arms, somehow that made it all right. "Why? Why would you do that?"

He leaned down and gave her a slow and gentle kiss. "Because you are precious to me and I would never abandon you."

She felt her face blush and her heart beat pick up.

He stood up holding her in his arms bridal style. "Let's go home Yugito-chan, my mom is making her special ramen."

"Home?"

He smiled and nodded. "Home."

They disappeared in a flash of yellow.

**SPOILER!!**

**SPOILER!!**

**SPOILER!!**



**Author's Note:** Again if any of you do not want to know what is going on in the manga read no further.

After Sasuke's statement of his new goal he has now officially become a villain and has to die. He has crossed a final line where he is no longer deserving of any sympathy what so ever. Up until this point I disliked Sasuke but thought he would ultimately be redeemed thanks to eh friendship and love of Naruto and Sakura.

But he no longer deserves redemption.

He deliberately betrayed his village to pursue his own personal vendetta. He nearly killed his best friend in pursuit of this vengeance. Then shortly after finally killing Itachi he meets a complete stranger who tells him a story. And THAT justifies wanting to now pursue vengeance against Konoha and the only people who have ever truly cared about him! He is placing more faith in a stranger's tale than he is in the words and actions of people he has known for most of his life. So of course he is now justified in wanting Naruto, Sakura, Kakashi, Shikamaru, etc. dead because apparently *they're* to blame for what happened to the Uchiha clan, along with all the other innocents who live in the village.

With that one statement Sasuke is now a worse traitor than even Orochimaru was. He is an enemy of Konoha now by choice.

He has to die.

# Epilogue

**Author's Notes:** Well this is it; this chapter brings the story to an end. I want to thank all of you who have read it and I especially want to thank everyone who took the time to leave a review. It still amazes me how popular this story has been. As I already said I have begun a prequel. I have no plans for a sequel, but I will leave that possibility open.

Now just one last rant before I begin the final chapter. I fully realize that a lot of people disliked some of the things I did in this story. Naruto was too powerful, too smart, too perfect, Hinata and Naruto got together too soon, I crippled Neji, I killed Gaara, Kankuro, Sasuke, Sakura, Tsunade, I made Yugito a love interest, and on and on. I read every review and every private message sent to me. The ones offering constructive criticism I honestly considered. The ones that just told me they didn't like my story I just ignored.

I realized a very long time ago that you will never make everyone happy, and in trying to do so you will only end up taking something unique and reducing it to the lowest common denominator. (As proof of this just look at the absolute mindless garbage that is 90 percent of all films and t.v. shows.) Yes, I killed characters, and yes, I did things some people hated. But I told **my** story and the story I liked. And in the end isn't that the whole point of this web site? The entire point of writing a story to begin with is to give voice to your own thoughts and imagination.

I really enjoyed writing this. The fact that others enjoyed reading it I count as just a huge bonus.

For which I thank you.

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**Two months later**

He was sitting in the waiting room nervously. Yugito, his second wife was sitting next to him holding his hand trying to comfort him. His mom, Alysa, his new brother Masaharu, uncle Shinzou, his niisan and Kiba were all there waiting with him.

Kushina saw the look on her son's face and grinned. "You don't need to be so nervous Naruto-kun, everything is fine."

"I know that, but I just can't help it."

A couple hours passed before Shizune came out. Everyone jumped to their feet.

"Is everything all right?" Naruto asked. "How is Hinata-chan?"

Shizune smiled and motioned for calm. "Mother and son are both doing fine. Come with me."

They all followed close behind as she took them to a private room on the second floor. There an exhausted looking Hinata held a small bundle in her arms as Neji smiled down.

Hinata looked up at her husband and gave him a gentle and loving smile. "Naruto-kun, there is someone here who wants to meet you."

Naruto walked to her side and looked down at the tiny little person in her arms. She gently held him out to his father and he oh so carefully took him. Kushina, Hinata, and Neji all told him how to hold a baby. Carefully supporting him Naruto looked down into the baby's face.

His son already had a little blonde hair and his eyes were open. They were a blue much lighter than his own. And on each of his little cheeks were three scars. It amazed and scared him how much he loved his son. It didn't seem possible that someone you had only just met could get such a hold on your heart.

Gently he leaned down and kissed his son's forehead. "Hello Minato-kun, I'm your dad, and I love you very much."

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## Five years later

A 21 year old Naruto looked up from the maps. Despite his age his eyes had weariness in them. In one way or another he had been fighting to make his dreams come true his entire life. Sometimes in moments like these the exhaustion from all that struggle came through. But even if his eyes held some fatigue they also held a greater strength and resolve. He wasn't just fighting for himself or his family now. He was fighting for everyone. He was fighting to bring on a new golden age of peace to the world.

"This is the last battle," Naruto told them. "After today the war will be over and there will be no more killing."

A pale and weary looking Jiraiya shook his head. "There will always be battles to be fought. Even when this war ends and peace begins again there will still be enemies out there somewhere."

Naruto nodded slowly. "I guess there will be," he admitted quietly. "But there won't be any more wars." Naruto looked closely at the man who had been his sensei and a kindly grandfather to him. Jiraiya was dying of liver failure. A slow painful death, and not the kind of heroic end the old pervert had always pictured for himself. He had always said he wanted to end his life in a glorious battle.

He looked at the other faces in the command tent. His mom, Kakashi, and Asuma were also glancing towards Jiraiya. They all knew.

The tent flap opened and his aid walked in. She was a 17 year old Chunin wearing a black and red body suit. Her long dark hair was tied in a ponytail with a pink bow. On her ring finger was an engagement ring from Sarutobi Konohamaru. She had an excited smile on her face. "Niisan! The Kages are coming out under flag of truce."

"Alysa!" her mother said sharply. "What have I told you about campo discipline?"

The girl gave her mother an amused look and then performed a ridiculously deep bow to her older brother. "Oh forgive me great and powerful Hokage-sama."

Naruto grinned and rubbed the top of her head affectionately. "All right Alysa-chan but just this once."

Kushina shook her head. "You know you're not helping."

Kakashi decided to try and bring things back on track. "It looks like they've accepted your offer to parlay."

"It's a waste of time," Jiraiya croaked. "They'll never agree to your terms."

"Probably not," Naruto admitted. "But if there's any chance to save lives I have to try." With that he left the meeting.

None of them tried to argue him out of it. They all knew he was going no matter what. Besides with his ultimate defense there was no chance that the Kages could do him any harm even if they were stupid enough to try.

---

As he left the command tent people saluted him or called greetings. He was surrounded by familiar faces.

Haku and Gabrella were talking with Kiba and Tayuya. Along with their six adopted children the Momochi's had a natural born son and daughter. They had just recently moved out of the Namikaze estates and into their own mansion. It had seemed odd at first to know there were Uchiha children in his home, but after awhile they had become part of the family. In a way that saddened him. The Uchiha were just people like everyone else, if only Riyuki and a few others could have understood that.

Kakashi had grown extremely close to his son Obito and they were hardly ever seen apart in the village.

Kiba and Tayuya had finally gotten married a year ago. Tayuya had given birth to healthy baby boy four months later. Even though she was occasionally seen chasing him around the village threatening to cut his balls off, they were a happy couple.

He spotted Ino and Chouji exchanging a kiss, no doubt for added luck. Hinata's old rival had found the man of her dreams and they were very happy with two little girls.

Seeing Ino and Chouji immediately made him think about Shika and Temari back in the village. Shika was acting Hokage while Temari was stuck there due to good old rule number 77. Naruto laughed at the irony of it. Temari had been trying to get pregnant for five years without success. This of course had led to Shikamaru complaining about being forced to try and get his wife pregnant when he's rather be relaxing. That in turn usually led to Kiba mocking him for complaining about *having* to have sex with a beautiful woman. Then of course Temari had gotten pregnant on the eve of the climatic final battle of the war and been forced to remain home. Not too surprisingly she blamed Shika.

Hinata was also home due to rule 77. She was going to have their third child. While she was there she would look after their son as well as their three year old daughter, Hannah. She would also take care of the four year old son he and Yugito had. The boy's name was Junsaku.

He missed all his children terribly, that was he worst thing about having to be out on campaign, having to be away from the ones you loved. He promised himself that when this war was over he was never leaving Konoha again unless he could take the whole family with him.

Thinking about family he also thought about uncle Shinzou. He had a total of eight children now from his three wives. Just as with his own

family all of Shinzou's children were being brought up to see the each other as brothers and sisters. Each child had a mom and two aunts. Shinzou's three eldest sons were especially close as only brothers could be. Shinzou was already talking about the day the three of them would be a genin squad.

He spotted Tenten and her genin squad. Her son Hizashi was living back in the Hyuga compound. With his father Neji... the clan head. The Hyuga clan really had changed and Naruto was very proud to have been the catalyst.

He finally found the person he's been looking for. Coming up from behind he suddenly grabbed her and gave her a kiss.

"Did I surprise you?"

Yugito smiled at him. "No silly, I smelled you sneaking up on me the whole way."

He shook his head. "One of these days I am going to surprise you."

"Good luck."

"The Kages have come out to parlay, since there are two of them you want to come with me so the numbers are even?"

A catlike grin played across her face. "I wouldn't miss it for the world."

---

The Raikage and the Tsuchikage stood in the ground between the two armies. Behind them was a force of about four thousand rock and lightning nin. Before them was an army of about five thousand with banners from every other ninja village including mist and sand. This was the army of the Grand Alliance, and it was the army of the fox lord, Namikaze Naruto.

All alone the lands of earth and lightning had struggled to resist the growing economic and military might of the alliance. Knowing they stood little chance in an open war they had instead launched a campaign of terror with assassinations and bombing and uprisings; all aimed at weakening the alliance. But in the end it had led the sixth Hokage to declare war on their lands, and now this would be the decisive battle. Unless they could come to some sort of agreement.

"He's coming," the Tsuchikage said. "And it looks like he is bringing his wife."

"Yugito?" The suddenly nervous Raikage asked.

The Tsuchikage smirked. "Oh that's right, she scares you doesn't she?"

"Don't mock me," the Raikage said. "If you had ever seen her angry you would be scared too."

Naruto and Yugito approached them. Bows and pleasantries were exchanged. Yugito smiled at the Raikage hungrily and she could smell his fear.

"Well then you asked for this parlay," the Tsuchikage began. "What do you want to discuss?"

Naruto smiled. "Since I'm in sight aren't all the Iwa nin supposed to retreat?" Since the Tsuchikage did not respond to his little joke Naruto continued. "My terms haven't changed. You and your families must surrender to me. You will be given spacious homes in the village of Konoha and treated well, but you will not be allowed to leave. Your nations must surrender unconditionally and end the terror attacks. Both of your countries will be allowed to join the grand alliance once I am satisfied they will honor their obligations. Think carefully before you answer, my terms are generous."



"We don't need to think about it," the Tsuchikage spat. "Your terms will leave us your slaves!"

Naruto grimaced thinking about his uncle all those years ago. "Unlike Iwa, Konoha does not keep slaves. Your country will have the same rights as all other alliance members."

"So you would try and reduce us to the same status as Waterfall or Grass?" The Tsuchikage demanded.

"That's right," Naruto stated. "All the members are equals and follow the same laws and hold the same obligations to one another. When your two nations join there will be an end to war."

"Do you truly believe that?" The Raikage asked. "Is that really your goal or just a pretty sounding piece of propaganda?"

Naruto looked at him firmly. "I mean to bring peace to this world and I will. Whether you live to see it or not is entirely up to you."

"And what place do ninja have in a world of peace?" The Tsuchikage mocked.

"Some will remain warriors no doubt." Naruto answered. "There will always be a need for soldiers and a police force to keep the peace and maintain order. But jutsus and chakra can have uses besides killing. The greatest healers in the world are medic nins. The greatest builders in the world are earth typed ninja. Ninja can bring water where it is needed, or wind to drive ships. Ninja can provide swift and certain transport of mail and goods and a hundred other tasks that do not require killing. There will always be a place for ninja in this world."

The Tsuchikage shook his head refusing to see it. "We are the greatest warriors this world has ever known. That is our place. To do what you suggest would strip us of all honor and glory."

"What I suggest is a way for us to live without pointless wars and the waste they cause."

"I've had enough," the Tsuchikage turned to go. "There is no possibility of agreement."

The Raikage also turned to leave.

"I'll be seeing you soon." Yugito purred.

Naruto shook his head sadly. "Why does it always come to this?"

---

He allowed the Kages to return and officially end the truce before he walked out well in front of his army. Just as he went a hand fell on his shoulder. He turned and saw who it was.

"Kid," Jiraiya's voice croaked. "Let me take the lead."

Naruto looked at the old man who he loved. "Granddad..."

He smiled one of his old happy smiles. "Come on kid, do this one last favor for me. We both know I'm dying; at most I have maybe six months left. My life has been a great story kid, one filled with adventure and romance and joy and sorrow. But every story has to end sometime. Me dying in a hospital bed just doesn't cut it. Now, going out all alone against an enemy army? Now that's a death worthy of a Sannin."

Naruto looked at the man. He suddenly reached out and pulled him into a fierce hug. "I love you prevy granddad."

"I love you too kid, I love you too."

---

Jiraiya stood out before the entire army, every eye was on him. He smiled, this was much better than slowly wasting away. He looked out towards the enemy. *The brave hero went fearlessly forward*

*against the enemy. He met his end like a true warrior.* He nodded happily, that was the perfect ending. He bit down on his thumb. "Just one more time. **Summoning Technique.**" Out of a huge puff of smoke Gamabunta appeared. Jiraiya was glad that the Uzumaki would have the toad summoning contract once he was gone.

Gamabunta looked up at the ninja sitting on his head. "This is it, isn't it Jiraiya?"

"Yeah it is." Jiraiya took out a flask and filled a cup. "Will you have a last drink with me Bunta?"

"It would be an honor." He put out his tongue and Jiraiya poured the contents of the flask onto it as he gulped down his own.

"All right Bunta, what do you say? One last time?"

The giant frog nodded and drew his sword. "Right!" He leapt forward and together he and Jiraiya went into the battle.

---

The forces of the Grand Alliance did not go forward. That was what Jiraiya had wanted. So instead he and all his ninja watched as Gamabunta delivered horrible destruction down on the enemy until his own wounds forced him to withdraw. Jiraiya was then left all alone in the middle of an enemy army.

They all came at him at once, but it took them ten minutes to finally bring the old man down.

Naruto lowered his head in respect and wiped his tears away. That had been a death worthy of a Sannin.

When he looked back up again he saw the enemy was rushing towards him. He smiled.

Taking out a kunai he sliced his palm. " **Summoning of the Kyuubi.**" He rode upon the head of the mighty nine tail fox. Just the

mere sight of the Kyuubi and the sense of his malevolent chakra was enough to bring the enemy army to a halt.

The Kyuubi chuckled and Naruto knew the baka fox wanted to play. The Kyuubi looked up at the man standing on his forehead. **Well you summoned me. Do you have an order for me or not?**

Naruto looked at the enemy army before him. "Sic 'em."

The Kyuubi howled with laughter and did exactly that.

---

The actual fighting lasted less than half an hour. Yugito had gone in and dealt with the Raikage personally. Other wise all the fighting had been done by Naruto and the Kyuubi. Naruto had ordered the army to stay where it was unless attacked.

Thus at the end of the battle the forces on one side had been wiped out almost to the last man while the forces on the other side had suffered exactly one casualty. It would go down as one of the most decisive victories in history and one of the most important. For with this victory the way to the unification of the whole continent was now open.

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## **Five hundred years later**

The academy teacher was looking at his students. "All right class we are going to do a review." As one they all moaned. Ignoring that he began. "We'll start with an easy one. Who was the sixth Hokage of Konoha?" Every hand rose. Anyone who didn't know the answer to such an easy question was going to fail the test tomorrow. He pointed to a boy.

"Namikaze Naruto," Momochi Jobi said.

The teacher nodded. "What were some of his accomplishments?" More hands rose. He nodded to a pink haired boy.

Haruno Sasuke spoke eagerly happy to show off what he knew. "He established two new clans here, the Uzumaki and the Momochi. He was the founder of the Grand Alliance and its first president. He brought an end to the age of warring nations and began the *Pax Konoha*, the peace that has lasted ever since. He was also the one to bind the Kyuubi to the service of the fox clan, the Namikaze." The teacher nodded pleased. The students all mocked him with whispers of teacher's pet.

He looked at his laziest student. "Nara Shikato, can you name me another accomplishment of the sixth Hokage's?"

The boy lifted his head up. "He changed what it meant to be ninja." The boy put his head back down again.

"Please explain," the teacher insisted.

Shikato raised his head again. "Bothersome," he muttered. "In the age of warring nations all ninja were expected to be warriors. But now a ninja is simply someone who is able to use chakra. A ninja can be anything from a soldier to a doctor to a farmer." Seeing the teacher nod the boy put his head back down.

"Was Namikaze Naruto always well respected?" He pointed to a blonde girl.

"No," Yamanaka Kara answered. "As a young child he was hated due to his being the Kyuubi's container. His mother killed everyone who threatened him."

The teacher nodded. "That is something all of you should remember, impressions can change over time. Someone who is a villain can become a hero, and a hero can end up a villain. Now who can tell me about the unknown clan?" He pointed to a dark haired boy.

Hatake Obito answered. "There was once a clan who revolted against the Hokage and tried to kill him. The Hokage ordered all records of the clan destroyed."

The teacher grinned. "And what was this clan's name?"

The boy shook his head, he wasn't about to fall for such a simple trick question. "No one knows, the clan's name was lost as well as their abilities and even the exact reason why they rebelled. It *is* known that the Hokage took revenge by killing all of them and exterminating the clan."

"What were some of the names the sixth Hokage was known by?"

"I'll answer that one." A girl's voice called out.

The teacher was not surprised that his top student would want to answer that question. "By all means Namikaze Kushina."

The girl first took her pet fox from her lap and set him down on her desk. She then stood so she had everyone's attention. She had long flowing red hair, green eyes, and a mischievous grin. On each cheek were three scars, one day she would replace her father as the summoner of the fox clan. She had on the black and red battle suit that both the Uzumaki and Namikaze clans wore. The only way to tell them apart was the clan patch. The Uzumaki's was a whirlpool. The Namikaze had a grinning fox with nine tails.

"Namikaze Naruto was the son of the fourth Hokage and the father of the eighth. He is recognized by most to be the greatest ninja who ever lived. In our home he has a memorial listing all his names and titles." She cleared her throat. "He was a loving son, a good brother, a devoted husband, a beloved father, a loyal friend, a terrible enemy, a fierce warrior, a great student, an adept politician." She needed another breath. "He never broke a single promise, he never abandoned a precious person, he never forgot an enemy, he invented over a hundred jutsus and seals, and he changed the world. In his day he was the Demon of the Leaf, the Second Flash, the Lord of Foxes, and the Summoner of the Kyuubi; but there was one other title that he was most proud of." She grinned and looked at all her classmates. "He was the greatest of all the Hokage's."

With that she sat back down and put her little fox back in her lap.

The teacher nodded, that did pretty much sum it up.

**THE END**